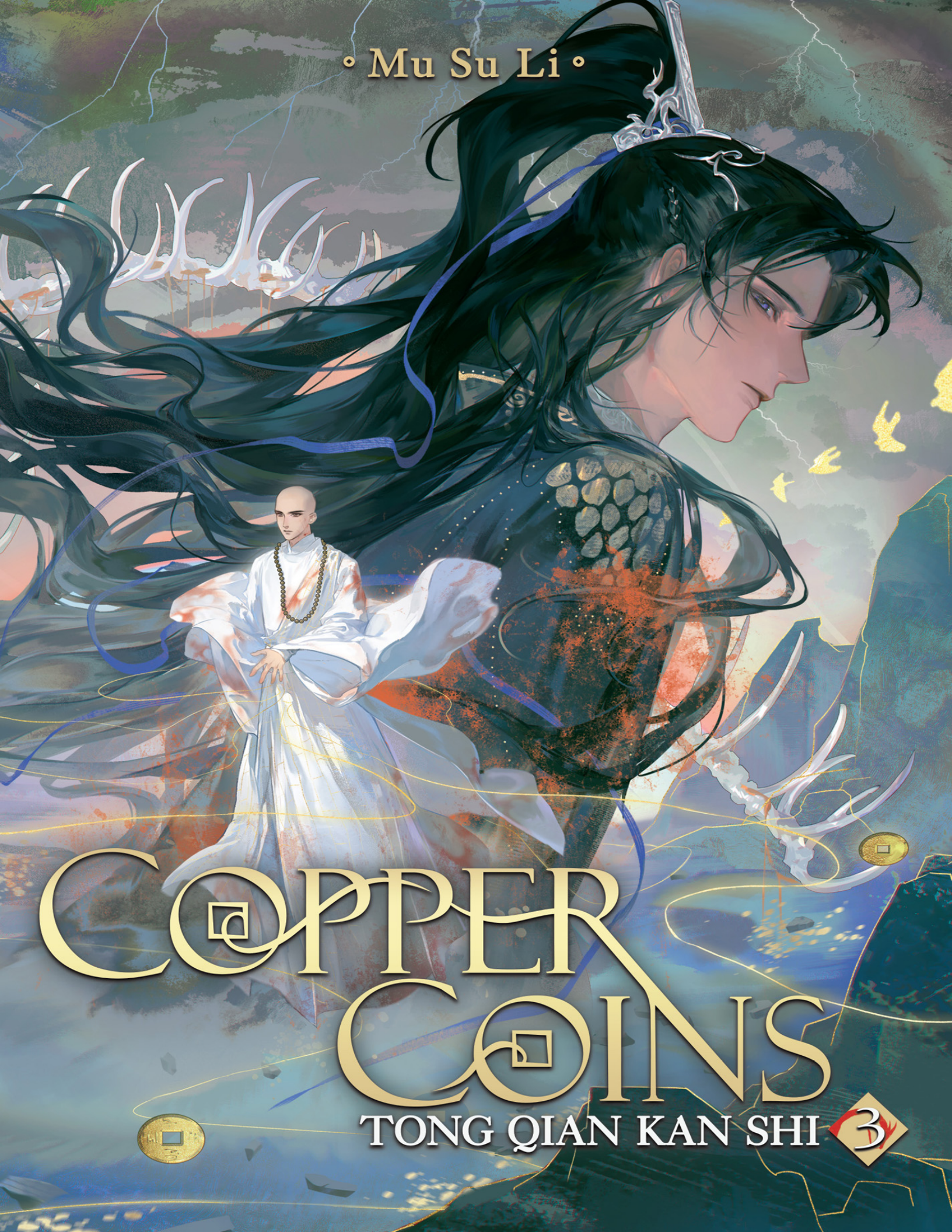
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TONG QIAN KAN SHI 3

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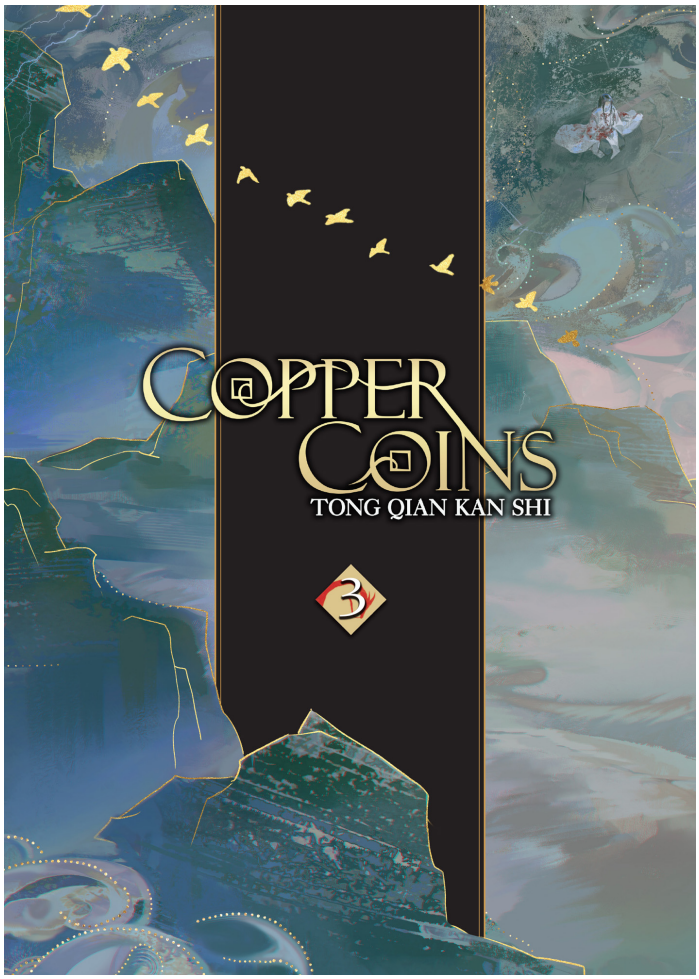
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Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

Copper Coins: Tong Qian Kan Shi (Novel) Vol. 3

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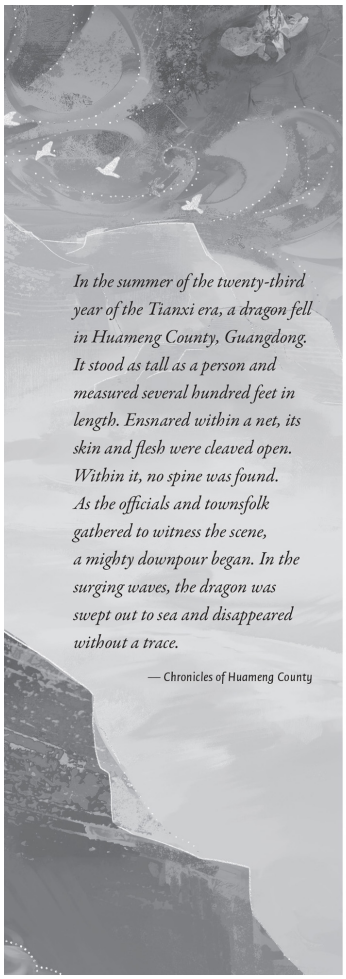
ARC 4

UNCHANGED



In the summer of the twenty-third year of the Tianxi era, a dragon fell in Huameng County, Guangdong. It stood as tall as a person and measured several hundred feet in length. Ensnared within a net, its skin and flesh were cleaved open. Within it, no spine was found. As the officials and townsfolk gathered to witness the scene, a mighty downpour began. In the surging waves, the dragon was swept out to sea and disappeared without a trace.

— Chronicles of Huameng County

Chapter 28:
Iron Military Tags

WITH THE MIST DISSIPATED, the path leading out of the forest was clear and visible. Though the Fang residence wasn't far, Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi's slow pace meant that they would only reach their destination by sunset if they started their journey now. Worried that any further delay might leave them facing closed gates, the two quickly departed.

By then, Xuanmin had already settled Xue Xian back into the wheelchair just outside the door. Xue Xian watched as the two figures vanished into the far edge of the woods, then suddenly heard Xuanmin's voice behind him, tone low: "Speak."

"Hm?" Xue Xian turned his head in confusion.

Xuanmin gestured toward the forest with his hand. "You sent them away on purpose."

He noticed that? Rubbing his face, Xue Xian flicked his gaze away. He muttered vaguely, "Fine, my bad."

Xuanmin shot him a puzzled look.

Xue Xian hesitated a little more, scratching his cheek. Eventually, he jerked his chin toward Xuanmin's neck. "Dragon saliva."

For a moment, Xuanmin was taken aback by Xue Xian's ready admission of fault. Then, with a resigned look, Xuanmin shook his head, turned away, and flicked his sleeve as he headed back inside.

"It's fine."

"Yeah, sure, 'it's fine.' Like *hell* it is!" Xue Xian snapped. "You're burning like a furnace, and you still have the nerve to say it's fine?"

Three injections of dragon saliva were beyond what anyone, even Xuanmin, could handle. How could he be fine? He was simply accustomed to holding himself back, and now he was treating his discomfort like another burden to be silently endured.

Xue Xian was about to say more when Xuanmin summoned the black bird from inside the building. The bird gave a sharp flap of its wings against the roof, then the floor, and Xuanmin descended again into the stone chamber below.

After a short while, Xuanmin returned with the lifeless man—though, since the monk was averse to filth and unwilling to touch most anyone, he was relying on his talisman's power to keep the body suspended in front of him. He reached down and pulled at something on the man's waist before taking him outside.

Xuanmin found a spot in the sprawling wilderness outside the bamboo building and buried the man there.

Once back inside, Xuanmin drew another talisman—this time for cleansing—and thoroughly purified the entire house, along with his own robes.

Xue Xian stared. *Your robes didn't even touch him, you know?*

Calm and unhurried, Xuanmin moved about with his usual expression, methodically erasing every trace of the stranger's presence from the bamboo house. Only when he was satisfied did he finally stop in front of Xue Xian.

"Let's go in," he said quietly before picking up Xue Xian and carrying him back inside. He placed him on the desk again, though this time the surface had been wiped spotless.

This bald donkey is really, truly, stupidly fastidious, Xue Xian thought.

If they were going to search for traces of the past, they couldn't just skim the surface. Xuanmin stood before the bookshelf and pulled out a few volumes. He set down a couple of books next to Xue Xian and began flipping through the others himself. The meaning of this gesture was obvious—he was tacitly allowing Xue Xian to help him search for clues within the books. This subconscious inclusion, the lack of guardedness, pleased Xue Xian. He picked up one of the books and leafed through it, though his mind wasn't fully focused on the task.

Because he was still thinking about dragon saliva.

Xuanmin seemed determined to suppress every bit of discomfort and lock it deep inside, without letting a single trace show. His fingers steadily turned pages, one after another, unhurried and unshaken. He revealed no hint of anything amiss.

Xue Xian stared at the book in his hands for a while before his gaze drifted back to Xuanmin. After a moment's thought, he reached out and brushed his fingers against Xuanmin's hand.

He pulled back immediately. Xuanmin's skin was scorching hot.

"Let me help you," Xue Xian blurted out, almost without thinking.

Xuanmin's attention was still fixed on the book. He gave a low hum in response but didn't look up, nor did his fingers stop turning pages. Clearly, he hadn't registered what Xue Xian's abrupt offer meant—he'd probably assumed it was about searching through the books.

But having spoken, Xue Xian couldn't take it back. "I mean with the dragon saliva."

Xuanmin's hand stilled on the page.

Since he had been repeatedly contaminated by this troublemaker's saliva, he had made a point of keeping his distance. Aside from the unavoidable necessity of carrying Xue Xian—since the latter still couldn't walk—he had avoided physical contact.

Like a moment ago. Xuanmin had placed the books beside Xue Xian but then moved back to the shelf rather than stay by the desk to read. If someone else had done this, their intentions would have been obvious. With Xuanmin, it didn't seem so deliberate. He wasn't the type to seek closeness with others.

Nevertheless, Xue Xian had noticed. That was why he wanted to resolve the effects of his saliva sooner rather than later.

Otherwise, this bald donkey will keep dancing around me like I'm some kind of plague rat.

"Let me help you," Xue Xian repeated. He continued to absently flip through the pages of his book, but he was looking at Xuanmin.

Xuanmin was silent for a time before turning to him.

“How?”

His expression remained as detached and solemn as ever, devoid of any hint of impropriety. Evidently, he assumed Xue Xian had some conventional method—like an antidote to counteract the venom.

Xue Xian narrowed his eyes and bit the tip of his tongue lightly. After a brief hesitation, he coughed and forged ahead.

“You know the saying people have about floods? ‘Blocking is less effective than dredging.’ How did you even become a monk? In the fragments of memory you’ve recovered, was there anyone enforcing rules on you? Were the precepts strict? There’s that other saying, isn’t there? ‘Wine and meat pass through the gut, but the Buddha stays in the heart.’ If no one’s keeping watch over you…”

Xue Xian rarely bothered with such lengthy preambles, and he had no idea if he was trying to persuade Xuanmin or himself. Yet the heavy atmosphere in the room remained unchanged, and as he spoke, even he began to falter. His words slowed until they stopped.

Their gazes met. Neither of them spoke.

Both of their faces were blank. However, beneath their matching exteriors, their inner thoughts were quite different.

After a long, silent standoff, Xue Xian’s temper flared. Unable to bear it any longer, he tossed the book he was holding onto the table with a loud snap as the pages slammed shut. “Just say it! Do you want my help or not? Huh?!”

Xuanmin lowered his eyes, as if he hadn’t heard a word, and turned another page of his book. Then, like he’d suddenly remembered something, he reached into the hidden pocket of his robe and flipped his sleeve.

A talisman shot out and landed squarely on Xue Xian’s forehead.

“*You*—”

Xue Xian swallowed the curse on his tongue. He couldn’t move an inch now that he was sealed in place. It took him a while to suppress the urge to vomit blood. If this whole mess hadn’t been his fault to begin with, he might’ve passed out from sheer frustration.

“Fine, fine!”

You're so *damn impressive after all.* But I'd advise against sealing me. You still need me to dig your grave.

There really was a risk of that. The effects of dragon saliva took time to manifest. If Xue Xian remembered correctly, the last time, Xuanmin hadn't started struggling until nightfall. This time, he was already feverish when the third dose had not yet fully taken effect. If he kept suppressing that inner fire until the full force hit, he might not survive when it did.

"There's no need." Xuanmin had waited until after sealing Xue Xian to speak.

No need, my ass! Xue Xian was too furious to respond.

"If you have nothing else to do, you might as well use the copper coins to nourish your bones," Xuanmin added.

Nourish your dad!

Every time Xuanmin opened his mouth, Xue Xian grew more irritated. He was dying to snap back at the bald donkey. But Xuanmin was impervious to words—a retort would change nothing; it might even make Xue Xian angrier.

See if I care if you live or die, he muttered on the inside and closed his eyes to focus on healing his bones. Out of sight, out of mind.

Xuanmin's copper coins *were* genuinely useful. Aside from the inexplicable resonance and connection to Xuanmin they created after prolonged use, there were no other side effects. Xue Xian trusted them enough to immerse himself in the healing process, and he quickly shut out the outside world.

In the past, it had taken him a whole night to reconnect half of the golden threads in his bones. The process was much faster this time. The coins responded to him as if they had almost accepted him as their master. Perhaps Xuanmin, tainted by dragon saliva, had inadvertently shared some of his aura with Xue Xian.

Xue Xian could almost feel the golden threads pulling toward the broken ends of his bones. Each tug was laborious, but with every successful connection came a wave of relief.

Another sensation crept through his body during this process, mingling with the spiritual energy from the coins. It slithered along the threads, spreading from the depths of his bones outward. It was a damp, heated ache, prickling like countless ants gnawing at him, restless and unbearable, though not quite painful. Xue Xian forced himself to endure the discomfort as he focused on guiding the thread upward.

Almost there… Damn it, it's so hot… Just a little more… Fuck, it's really too hot…

Caught in this torment, Xue Xian struggled back and forth until finally, just as he was on the verge of exploding, he connected the threads to the other broken end. In that instant, his entire spine, waist, and legs seemed to unlock. A warm current flowed through his meridians, bones, and the golden threads that now filled his spine. Slowly, the current seeped into his legs…

Success!

His mind relaxed at once, a half year's frustration evaporating in that moment.

But the relief was short-lived, and his lingering restlessness surged like a tidal wave. He heard himself gasp.

As his senses abruptly sharpened, he realized he was drenched in sweat, his skin hypersensitive—so much so that the slightest shift of his clothes sent shivers down his spine, eliciting another wave of perspiration. Dazed, he remained frozen, barely able to savor the joy of his restored legs before another realization struck him like a bolt of lightning.

Because of the resonance from the copper coins…the effects of the dragon saliva…had somehow transferred to him.

At that moment, four phrases echoed in his mind:

Shooting yourself in the foot.

What goes around comes around.

You reap what you sow.

How the hell is anyone supposed to endure this?!

Unbeknownst to them, the sky outside had deepened into a profound midnight blue. A rare windless night had fallen, and the wide expanses of wild forest in the mountain hollow stood in complete silence, without the slightest rustle of leaves, lending an unusual stillness to the scene. It was broken only by the occasional cry, distant and drawn out, from the black bird Xuanmin had probably raised.

The bird had flown out of the building right after nightfall, its whereabouts now unknown. The sound it made, however, was unlike any normal bird's call. It was, eerily, more like a human sigh. In the dead of night, the effect was chilling. No wonder rumors of hauntings had spread.

The sighs echoed through the valley, overlapping and reverberating.

The mist that Xue Xian had swept away during the day returned, creeping from the depths of the valley until it filled every crevice. This miasma was far heavier than normal fog, and its thick, greasy white swiftly enveloped everything. Anyone within it would have been unable to see their own hand. Even those nearby could only be heard, not seen.

Thankfully, Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi had left. If they'd been caught in this fog on the road, their lives would've been in danger. Unlike them, Xue Xian and Xuanmin had no reason to fear the mist. When they'd cleared it before, they'd simply done it for the sake of the other two. They had ways to ward off its toxicity, and it wouldn't affect them much.

After its dispersal, the foggy miasma returned even thicker than before. It permeated the bamboo house in the hollow, seeping through windows and doors, so that the lower inner room was filled with hazy vapor and a slight chill.

Xue Xian, sitting in this cool mist, was burning up and drenched in sweat. With a frown, he yanked at his collar. His robes were in disarray from all his repeated fiddling and tugging; they now hung open and loose against his body. Though the black robes appeared dry, they were already soaked through. The thin fabric stuck unpleasantly to his shoulders, back, and arms. The loosened front sagged at his abdomen, exposing a tapering strip of skin from his neck down to his waist. Six months of partial paralysis had left him much gaunter. His muscles, now slick with a fine film of sweat, had atrophied. The sweat's sheen caught the dim light, emphasizing the slight dips and rises of his bones.

He remained sitting at the desk, head down, his hands gripping its edge. Perspiration beaded on his eyelashes, blurring his vision even through his half-lidded eyes.

Xue Xian didn't know how much worse this triple dose of dragon saliva was compared to what Xuanmin had endured that night, but *he* was miserable. Waves of sweat poured down his body, and his skin felt everything—even his sweat evaporating made him flinch. Every inch of him, every pore, screamed at the slightest sensation.

The heat and restlessness demanded release, but he had no idea where to get it from. Worse, the intensity left his bones aching. They seemed weak and bloated, as if waterlogged. Even lifting a hand felt exhausting. His mind grew foggy. The black bird's sighs outside twisted into something suggestive in his ears, only fueling his agitation.

He had meant for Xuanmin to find a solution to this, but if the monk kept resisting it, Xue Xian's torment would never end.

If this continues, he'll really…

Xue Xian squinted and licked his lips, then shook his head to clear it. The motion sent a trickle of liquid down his neck. It left a jarring tingle as it traveled from the nape of his neck, ran along his collarbone, then slid over his chest. His grip on the table tightened, and a shudder ran through him as he exhaled sharply, brows pinched.

He might have called out to Xuanmin—maybe he'd mumbled something, or maybe the sound had died in his throat before it emerged. He didn't know.

After what felt like an eternity, when he opened his eyes, the mist and miasma had thickened. Had someone summoned it, or had it gathered by itself? He could no longer make out the nearby oil lamp nor his robes crumpled around his waist.

Drowning in the dense fog left Xue Xian a little disoriented. He frowned, breathing hard as his heavy eyes wandered vacantly. His sweat-soaked lashes fluttered once, then twice, the movements languorous. He couldn't even shut them all the way.

Through the haze, he heard Xuanmin's voice from somewhere close. Or was it distant?

“Give me your hand.”

Unsure if he’d imagined it, Xue Xian loosened one hand from the table and slowly reached forward. He’d only extended it a few inches when another hand, boiling hot but steady, grasped him. That hand held him fast, giving him another source of support.

Naturally, Xue Xian leaned into it, letting his weight sink into that grip. His fingers tightened as his lips parted to speak—but before any words escaped, he gasped harshly.

Another hand had emerged from the mist to caress the skin of Xue Xian’s abdomen.

Xue Xian’s lashes trembled, his breath hitching in confusion. Then, it quickened, becoming harried.

The rush of heat and urgency had finally found an outlet. He frowned as he let go of the table and seized the hand at his waist. He tugged it closer, following his instincts as he guided it beneath the crumpled fabric of his robe.

“Don’t move,” the owner of the hand murmured in a low voice.

The fog was so dense that Xue Xian’s eyes saw nothing but white. He couldn’t see Xuanmin’s face, but his tone was as cool as always. Except there *was* a hint of hoarseness, likely from the prolonged fever.

At this point, obedience was the last thing on Xue Xian’s mind. He guided Xuanmin’s hand to fumble beneath his robes. The folds of Xue Xian’s robes shifted with each movement of Xuanmin’s fingers, hurried and disordered, clumsy but relentless…

The encounter was frantic, and Xue Xian’s mind faded in and out the whole time. He only knew that at some point, the man silently aiding him had been dragged closer, so close Xue Xian had to part his knees to make space. Even as he shuddered and gasped through the hurried, confused tugging, he felt his partner’s physical response.

The fog remained impenetrable—he still couldn’t see Xuanmin’s face. Xue Xian could only hear his breath, inches away, mingling with his own.

Xuanmin's other hand, the one supporting him, had ended up pressed against the table. His fingers clenched and unclenched in rhythm with his other hand. Xue Xian's forehead rested heavily against Xuanmin's shoulder, his half-closed eyes wet with moisture.

Xuanmin told him again not to move, then tried to step back for some reason. Xue Xian tightened his grip on Xuanmin. The potency of the dragon saliva had induced an unusual sensation, making release almost impossible. So much time passed that Xue Xian's agitation peaked, and he almost cried out before he finally felt that an ending was close.

When it came, he was unsure if he had actually found release or had just seized Xuanmin's hand. Xue Xian's fingers trembled violently, his spine taut as a bowstring.

He abruptly buried his forehead in the crook of Xuanmin's neck, his squinted eyes glazed over. He held on like that for a long moment until he finally sagged, his breath rolling in heavy gasps. Another wave of perspiration spread across his body. He was completely soaked.

Yet, the potency of the dragon saliva was not so easily dismissed. Before long, the restlessness returned.

The night became a blur of fog and panting, fragmented beyond recollection. By the end, Xue Xian couldn't even remember how long he'd been barreling along with Xuanmin's help.

No matter how long it lasted, the mist never lifted, and Xue Xian never saw Xuanmin's face. The strangeness of it all added an odd sense of shame, enough that even the shameless Xue Xian felt his cheeks burn at times.

Eventually, Xue Xian stilled, the impatience within him gone, leaving only a faint echo of desire that faded with the billows of heat rising from his skin. He leaned drowsily on the desk, and after a short pause, his idle hand fiddled with the oil lamp. The dim light brightened, and the heavy fog seemed to understand. It lifted.

The fog Xuanmin summoned…

Xue Xian thought this but was too tired to say it. He glanced downward. His disheveled robes had been somewhat straightened, but the

table was still a mess. Where the lamplight fell, it revealed sweat-smeared fingerprints, suggestive yet indistinct.

Nearby, Xuanmin sat on a cushion, eyes closed, quietly meditating. The neat stack of books he'd picked out rested beside him. It was as if he'd never left his spot.

The contrast between his composure and Xue Xian's disarray was so stark that, for a moment, Xue Xian wondered if it had all been a hallucination. Then he noticed the faint marks on the monk's wrist—proof that someone had held him. Otherwise, Xue Xian might've thought he'd fallen prey to another inner demon.

Studying the marks, Xue Xian finally spoke, his voice lazy but insistent. “Courtesy demands I reciprocate. Come here—I’ll help you too. You can summon the fog again, and we’ll pretend it never happened.”

Xuanmin didn’t open his eyes.

“There’s no need,” he said quietly. “It’s already been resolved.”

Xue Xian, still dazed, blinked slowly. “Resolved? *How?* If meditation could fix it, then why did I—”

He cut himself off, leaving the rest unsaid.

Xuanmin hesitated.

“Once you were free of it…so was I.”

For a while, Xue Xian processed this in stunned silence. He wanted to spew blood all over that bald donkey’s face. How perfect. Like shooting an arrow at your enemy, only for it to turn in midair and hit you in the heart instead.

“Give me your belt,” Xue Xian said flatly.

Xuanmin, eyes still closed, frowned. “Why?”

“I don’t feel like living anymore. I’m going to hang myself at your door.”

An awkward silence fell.

The atmosphere had been manageable while they were speaking, but now an undercurrent of unspoken tension began to permeate the room.

Xue Xian lowered his eyes, letting the quiet stretch.

“What time is it, anyway?” he said at last. “If you’ve finished sorting through everything, should we head back to the Fang residence soon?”

Before Xuanmin could even respond, Xue Xian felt something in his outer robe’s pocket twitch. The movement was fleeting—a brief, subtle shift—then it stilled.

Was that my imagination?

Still sluggish, Xue Xian stared at the folds of his robe. He didn’t bother to check inside it; he just waited to see if it would happen again.

The soft sound of metal lightly tapping against itself echoed through the otherwise silent room.

Clink.

“It moved,” Xue Xian muttered, pointing at his robe before instinctively looking back at Xuanmin.

Xuanmin had opened his eyes, and his dark gaze was fixed in Xue Xian’s direction. It was impossible to tell whether he’d just opened them upon hearing Xue Xian’s words, or if he’d been watching for a while.

The lamplight was too dim to reach him all the way, leaving Xuanmin’s expression shadowed beneath his brow. Even if Xue Xian could see it clearly, his brain, drained from a night of debauchery, wouldn’t have been able to decipher the emotions anyway.

Xuanmin was probably just as expressionless as ever.

“Something moved,” Xue Xian repeated.

Truly, some things required moderation. Too much indulgence not only made one lazy but dull-witted. Xue Xian’s vapid expression was certainly not his usual one. He’d seemed relatively coherent when talking about what had happened, but faced with a sudden change, he was completely lost.

Xuanmin, draped in shadow, watched Xue Xian for a while before just responding, “Mm.”

His voice, deep and steady in the quiet night, carried none of its usual sharpness or chill. Wrapped in the warm glow of the lamplight, it held a trace of gentleness, stirring something inexplicable in Xue Xian’s chest.

Lost in that feeling, Xue Xian remained still until the rustling in his pocket sounded again, snapping him back to attention. At this third disturbance, he shook off some of his lethargy and reached into his pocket.

The fabric inside was still damp from his earlier sweating. When he pulled out a handful of thin iron tags, their surfaces were misted with condensation.

Clink.

As Xue Xian laid them out, another faint tremor ran through the tags. This time, he was certain one of them had moved. He placed the two dozen or so tags on the table beside himself. His slender fingers sifted through them under the lamplight.

Clink.

“Found it,” Xue Xian said, tapping the culprit before picking it out.

“Perhaps its resentment hasn’t dispersed,” Xuanmin said.

Xue Xian hummed lazily, holding the tag up to the light. He squinted and turned it over to examine the scratches on its back. After a long moment, he clicked his tongue. “Can’t read it.” The marks were too deep and chaotic, impossible to decipher—let alone identify what had been written there originally.

Xue Xian straightened up and extended the tag toward Xuanmin.

“What?” Xuanmin asked.

“Take it. Help them pass on.” Xue Xian gestured at the pile of military tags. “Twenty-eight of them. You’ll need twenty-eight sticks of incense.”

As he spoke, the tag in his hand trembled again, as if trying to escape his grip.

“Don’t move,” Xue Xian said absently to the tag.

Don’t move…

When Xue Xian had been lost in desperation earlier, fumbling clumsily in the fog, Xuanmin had said those same words more than once. The memory of Xuanmin’s voice mingling with his own ragged breathing rose unbidden in Xue Xian’s mind. He trailed off abruptly, and by the time he regained his focus, his ears and cheeks were hot. He stiffly clutched the tag and glanced at Xuanmin.

Xuanmin’s gaze lowered briefly before it flicked up to sweep over Xue Xian’s face. But his eyes settled on the tag instead of meeting Xue Xian’s. Whether it was coincidence or deliberate avoidance wasn’t obvious.

Earlier, after the mist had cleared, Xue Xian had adopted a casual, lazy tone to suppress the awkwardness. After all, despite his many years of

existence, he had never encountered a situation like this one. Unsure how to handle it, he could only treat it as something utterly mundane, as if it were nothing more than a casual favor between companions. Given enough time, the hazy, chaotic memories would fade, and it might become just another forgettable, ordinary incident. He and Xuanmin could return to their usual dynamic, unchanged. Perhaps that was why Xuanmin had summoned the mist—to obscure their faces, to avoid seeing each other's expressions, to make it all feel more like a fevered dream, leaving no unnecessary aftermath.

Now, as certain words triggered unavoidable recollections and Xue Xian's emotions surged, he realized some things couldn't be brushed aside by acting naturally. He studied the tag in his hand before snapping his head up. He looked at Xuanmin.

Forcing a smirk, Xue Xian tried to drag the atmosphere back to normal with an extra-offhanded expression. Unfortunately, he only managed a strained, half-hearted smile. After a second, he gave up.

"This tag doesn't seem resentful," he said flatly. "More like it has some unfinished business."

Xuanmin was either spaced out or deep in thought. He paused before he came back to the conversation.

"After being sealed in the underwater tomb for so long, its spirit has mostly scattered. There's isn't enough resentment for it to coalesce." Xuanmin seemed to think about it, then rose from the meditation cushion and walked over. "Give it to me," he said, extending his hand.

Though Xuanmin had been looking at Xue Xian earlier, he avoided eye contact now that he was close and simply took the tag. He wrapped it in a talisman, murmured a sutra, then flicked the paper-wrapped tag with his finger.

The tag emitted a low hum and vibrated violently in his grip. Then, a faintly outlined figure emerged from it, hovering just above the ground before Xuanmin.

Xue Xian watched the figure. Its features were blurred, as if shrouded in mist.

Mist…

Xue Xian's face fell. He rolled his eyes skyward, forcefully suppressing the inappropriate association before continuing his appraisal.

Though indistinct, the figure's features were vaguely refined. He wasn't dressed in military armor, but in plain, worn winter robes. His sleeves hung empty at his sides, unsupported by flesh and bone. Clearly, such severe injuries would've made returning to the battlefield impossible; without hands, holding weapons was out of the question. It was inevitable that he would have to go home. But for a soldier in this state, homecoming must've been bittersweet.

As Xue Xian studied him, the figure seemed startled. He looked down at himself, taking a long moment to realize he had manifested a form. Then, he knelt on one knee before Xuanmin and Xue Xian, bowing deeply in an awkward, incomplete salute. Without hands to brace himself, standing back up was quite a task.

"Th-thank you, Master, for your help," he said, his voice as faint and indistinct as his form. Even so, he seemed surprised. "I can speak again…" he murmured. "Can you hear me?"

Xuanmin gave him a once-over before nodding.

"Were you the one who moved earlier?" Xue Xian asked.

The figure nodded. "Yes."

"Any unfinished business? Or lingering grudges keeping you from moving on?"

The figure nodded again, though he shook his head right after that. "No, not grudges, just…"

Unlike a normal spirit, he had been pieced together from fragments of resentment and a shattered soul. His speech was slow and halting, as if he was struggling to remember words mid-sentence. After a pause, he managed, "I heard the two of you talking about leaving…"

Heard? Xue Xian froze, recalling his earlier attempt at small talk. He'd said something like *"If we're done here, let's clean up and get back to the Fang residence."*

*But, seriously…*heard*?!*

“You heard? What else did you hear?” Xue Xian’s face cycled through shades of black, green, and white. He darted his eyes toward Xuanmin.

Xuanmin glanced back at him, then at the spirit, as if also waiting for an answer to the question.

If this damn tag had been conscious the whole time, able to hear everything outside—Xue Xian had never felt his face burn like this before. If a third party knew about what they’d done…

He couldn’t help recalling the details. Actively, this time. Yet even after retracing it all, the fragments of his recollection remained hazy. He couldn’t remember whether he’d cried out in desperation or if there’d been other reckless words.

Probably not, but who could say? Well, someone could, but… Xue Xian eyed Xuanmin before pinching the bridge of his own nose. *Maybe I should just die.* Or hurry up and send this tactless ghost on its way.

Xuanmin shifted slightly. Whether intentionally or not, he now stood between Xue Xian and the spirit, as if shielding someone from view. Blocked from sight, Xue Xian could no longer see the soldier, only Xuanmin’s back. Likewise, the soldier couldn’t see Xue Xian. The thought eased some of his embarrassment.

Fortunately, the spirit’s reply came quickly: “My mind’s been foggy. I only regained awareness when I heard you mention leaving. But…before you go, could you do me a favor?”

“Speak,” Xuanmin said, as succinct as ever.

Perhaps surprised by their immediate agreement—or maybe he was simply disoriented—the spirit paused.

“Well…could you…could you take me back to my hometown?”

Chapter 29:
Passerby

XUE XIAN BLINKED, leaning around Xuanmin to glance at him. "Your hometown?"

"Mm." The soldier nodded, still speaking haltingly. "Earlier, I heard you mention Mount Boji. My home is on its sun-facing side, at the foothills. It's just a small village."

That wasn't far at all. Just a short walk around the mountain's base from this valley. However…

Didn't you say you only regained awareness when you heard us talking about leaving? Now you're saying you heard the mountain's name too? When exactly did you wake up?!

Xue Xian had a dozen questions lodged in his throat, but he swallowed them all and leaned back with a flat expression.

"My parents and wife are still there. If you could bring my military tag to them, it'd give them closure."

Fortunately, the soldier seemed too preoccupied to notice Xue Xian's odd behavior. He rambled on to Xuanmin about when he had enlisted, how many years it had been since he returned home, on and on. His words were disjointed but not unpleasant. At first, Xue Xian listened a little, propped against the table. But soon, he was openly staring at Xuanmin's back, lost in thought.

It struck him that this might have been the first time he'd ever properly looked at Xuanmin from behind. When he'd been a paper figure clinging to Xuanmin's waist pouch, he'd only ever seen the monk's chin from below. When he'd become a golden marble, he'd had even fewer chances to look out. After regaining his true form, he'd either been coiled around Xuanmin's wrist like a thread or looming over him like a small mountain. Even in human form, he'd usually been carried, his face hidden under black robes. Once he'd gotten the wheelchair, he'd always taken the lead…

Now that he thought about it, he'd seen Xuanmin from every bizarre angle except this very ordinary one. If anything, he'd been the one turning his back to Xuanmin more often.

Admittedly, it was an ideal vantage point. No matter how brazen his gaze, it didn't matter. Xuanmin couldn't see it, and there was no risk of awkwardness. Xuanmin's shoulders were broad, his frame lean yet solid beneath his thin monk robes. He was taller than Xue Xian had realized—tall enough to block someone completely from view.

The outline of that back…made Xue Xian want to move closer.

His fingers twitched against the table. Just as he began to lift his hand, the soldier came to the end of his spiel. "I beg you to grant this last wish. In my next life, I'll—"

"No need." Xuanmin cut him off coolly. "Without entering reincarnation, such promises are meaningless."

Thinking he'd been refused, the soldier grew frantic, and he began to stutter.

"We'll send you off after finishing up," Xuanmin said, cutting him off.

The soldier, still stumbling, thanked them profusely.

Xue Xian's raised hand settled back on the table. Whether he touched it or not, facing Xuanmin's back eased his discomfort somewhat.

"Are you just taking those few books?" Xue Xian asked.

"There's no need. I've memorized them." Xuanmin glanced at him before turning around. "It's nearly dawn. If we deliver this to the village before returning to the Fang residence, the sun will be up."

Meeting Xuanmin's eyes brought back some of Xue Xian's earlier daze. When Xuanmin reached out to lift him, Xue Xian moved to comply on instinct—only for his body to stiffen like a board from head to toe. The moment Xuanmin's robes brushed against him, Xue Xian jumped back to awareness.

"My legs are fine!"

He looked up sharply as he spoke, knocking his forehead against Xuanmin's chin with a thunk. Xue Xian hissed, but before he could react, Xuanmin touched him where they'd collided. Xuanmin's fingers gently massaged the sore area on Xue Xian's forehead.

"A dragon's head isn't so easily dented. I was hissing on your behalf," Xue Xian grumbled.

Since their earlier…*activities*, Xuanmin's touch had become impossible to ignore. Xue Xian stayed rigid but didn't pull away. He let Xuanmin rub the spot a few times before he asked dryly, "Did you bite your tongue?"

"It's fine." Xuanmin withdrew and looked at Xue Xian's lower half. "You said your legs are healed?"

Xue Xian nodded. "Earlier, you told me to use the coins to heal my bones. By nightfall, they were fixed. I just didn't get a chance to…say so…"

The words tumbled out before he could stop them. He hadn't gotten a chance to say so, and why not? Because the entire night had been spent on —well, other pursuits. Why had he said that?

Brought up the taboo subject! Ugh!

Xue Xian averted his eyes and spoke in a monotone. "In short, first, my legs work. Second, I should stop talking. That's all." He pressed his lips together, as if sealing them shut on the spot.

"Mm," Xuanmin answered, indicating he'd heard. Before the odd atmosphere could thicken again, he turned to the bookshelf and replaced the volumes he'd singled out earlier.

Xue Xian watched Xuanmin's back for a little while before he looked away.

Biting his tongue, Xue Xian braced his hands on the table and tentatively moved his legs.

They moved!

Of course they did. He'd already moved them earlier when pulling Xuanmin between them. Mentally scoffing at himself, Xue Xian planted his feet firmly on the ground and slid off the table.

As it turned out, even if now functional, legs that had been immobilized for half a year might not have the strength to support one's full weight. Xue Xian's knees buckled in a flash.

Before Xue Xian could collapse into an unsightly heap, Xuanmin's hand shot out. He gripped Xue Xian's wrist and caught him with unshakable steadiness. Xuanmin's hold was so firm the tendons bulged on the back of his hand.

"Weren't you putting books away?" Xue Xian asked. "Do you have eyes in the back of your head?"

Xuanmin ignored the question, frowning. "Why would you get down so recklessly?"

"If soaring into the skies isn't a problem, why would descending to the earth require caution?" Xue Xian retorted.

Leaning on Xuanmin's support, Xue Xian tried to channel strength into his legs. The long-numb limbs finally began tingling with delayed sensation, as if countless fine needles were piercing every inch of his skin. The feeling was far from pleasant, but to Xue Xian, it was nothing short of miraculous. As the prickling numbness faded, he could feel his dormant legs awakening.

"I can walk," Xue Xian said, looking up at Xuanmin with something like wonder. Still bracing against Xuanmin's grip, he stomped his feet to shake off the last of the tingling before attempting a step. "I can really walk."

His tone was almost dreamy, as if he couldn't quite believe it. Like he'd been granted something extraordinary. For someone so unruly and proud, accustomed to soaring through clouds with thunder at his heels, this simple ability left him stupefied for a long moment. He seemed afraid to trust it.

When he looked up again, he found Xuanmin's gaze had shifted from his legs to his face.

"What's wrong with my face?" Xue Xian touched his cheek, snapping out of his awed stupor. "Do I look stupid? If someone broke your legs and paralyzed you for half a year, you'd probably react worse!"

He chuckled ruefully.

Having been caught, Xuanmin averted his eyes. “Take a few more steps. I’ll support you.”

Lost in the joy of regained mobility, Xue Xian didn’t catch the rare gentleness in Xuanmin’s tone.

True to form, the dragon’s physique was extraordinary. Despite the long period of disuse, his legs regained full strength after just a few steps, as if they’d never been injured.

Only Xue Xian knew the truth—his missing vertebrae hadn’t returned. The threads conjured by Xuanmin’s coin served as substitutes, and the substitutes were temporary. For true recovery, he’d need to reclaim the rest of his spine. Nevertheless, being able to walk and run again was enough to lift Xue Xian’s spirits. The sheer relief overshadowed everything else, so much so that his earlier embarrassment faded. Forgetting himself, he walked steadily up the steps to the outer room and pointed at the wheelchair by the door.

“It’s yours. Might come in handy fifty years from now,” Xue Xian declared with a tip of his chin.

Xuanmin blinked. If he let this troublemaker wander around the house with all of his pent-up energy, he might spout even more infuriating nonsense, so Xuanmin delayed no further. With the dazed soldier along for the trip, he and Xue Xian headed out of the valley.

Neither of them feared the forest’s mist, and the deceased soldier had no reason to fear it either. Soon, they left Mount Boji and followed its base southward toward the village under the cover of night.

While the valley had been thick with miasma, it was clear and bright outside. For once, there was no rain or snow, just a silver crescent moon hanging over the mountain. It cast a frost-like glow on the path.

Now that Xue Xian was able to walk properly, his steps were light and steady, unhurried and silent—quite unlike his usual temperament, but somewhat similar to Xuanmin’s. His thin black robes fluttered in the night wind as they rounded the mountain path, occasionally brushing against roadside grass. The side of him facing the moon was outlined in silver, tall and straight, while his other half melted into the darkness with his robes. As

Xue Xian walked the mountain path with Xuanmin, they looked like a pair of underworld envoys, one in black and the other in white. It sent chills down the soldier's spine.

By the time they reached the halfway point, the dawn bell and drum from Qingping County had already begun to sound, echoing outward from the city walls. On the southern side of the mountain, roosters crowed and dogs barked in response. When they arrived at the village marker, most of the villagers were already awake, their murmurs faintly audible.

Xue Xian and Xuanmin were escorting a resentful ghost—albeit a fragmented, disoriented one—which would probably frighten the villagers. To avoid delays, Xue Xian cast an illusion over all three of them before entering the village, making them invisible and inaudible to humans and animals alike.

"Which way to your home?" Xue Xian asked.

The soldier pointed deeper into the village. "Follow this path straight ahead. There's a pond—walk around it, and it's right there."

"Let's go, then."

Just as Xue Xian spoke, a faint, eerie sigh echoed from nearby. The sound was abrupt and unsettling in the village's lingering darkness.

Almost immediately, someone in the village screamed. The murmur of voices grew louder, tinged with panic. A dog began barking wildly, setting off more baying in a chain reaction.

The sound wasn't unfamiliar to Xue Xian at all. He raised his head and scoffed. "What great timing."

The villagers' voices continued, buzzing like a stirred hornet's nest. A few sharper cries stood out:

"The ghost bird! The ghost bird is here!"

"Why would it come to our village? Did someone bring bad luck?"

"We're doomed, we're doomed—"

"Probably not doomed, but something terrible is coming!"

The so-called "ghost bird" was the black bird often perched on Mount Boji, the one that had likely been raised by Xuanmin. After years in

the mountain’s thick mist, its cries were uniquely unsettling, earning it a demonic reputation among the villagers. To them, the bird was a winged harbinger of doom. If it circled a few times overhead, they were sure the entire village would be cursed.

“Haah—”

Another long sigh echoed, making Xue Xian’s eye twitch. While others might have found it eerie, it evoked something else for him. After all, during his earlier “activities,” its sigh had woven through the mist, harmonizing with his own panting.

Awkward.

Just hearing it made his temples throb, his jaw clench, and his fingers itch—to strangle the bird, or to grab someone and bite them.

Unfortunately, the bird seemed almost supernatural. It flew around the village a couple of times, then somehow spotted their hidden group and dove straight toward them.

It was a good thing they hadn’t yet reached the center of the village, or the chaos would’ve been unbearable. Without a hint of tact, the bird looped around the trio before perching neatly on Xuanmin’s shoulder. It let out a soft squeak as if coquettishly greeting him.

This, of course, made the villagers scream even louder.

“Look, the ghost bird—it’s hovering in midair!”

“Right! Like it’s perched on something invisible! What’s it standing on?!”

The illusion had been meant to grant them quiet entry, but thanks to this idiot bird, they might as well have paraded through town. The entire village was staring in their direction, expressions wary. If not for the fear of provoking the so-called ghost bird, they might’ve already charged at them with brooms and rakes.

And the bird wasn’t done. Seemingly unafraid of humans, it tilted its head curiously at the trembling villagers before adding another extended squawk. The cry wavered dramatically, the very picture of provocation.

That sound grated on Xue Xian’s nerves, and he poked the bird’s owner, encouraging him to slap a silencing talisman on the wretched

creature.

The black bird seemed to have a natural aversion to Xue Xian. Its beady eyes glared at the dragon who'd whispered into its master's ear, and its feathers puffed up as it stretched its neck to peck him.

Xue Xian, just as itching for a fight, pinched its yellow beak between two fingers and pulled it closer.

"In my free time, I love catching birds to roast," he said darkly. "Out here in the wilderness, I'm not picky. Raw or cooked, plucked or unplucked, I'll eat anything."

Faced with this life-threatening intimidation, the bird froze like a wooden chicken. After a long pause, it carefully extracted its beak from Xue Xian's grip, then turned it watery eyes toward Xuanmin. Seeing that the feathered pest was a tattletale, Xue Xian also looked at Xuanmin expectantly.

That a mighty dragon would stoop to bickering with a bird was truly a talent in itself. It seemed the name Xue Xian, meaning *idle*, was well-earned.

Xuanmin hadn't expected to be caught in this crossfire. At a loss for words, he simply sighed.

Xue Xian wasn't *actually* trying to compete with the bird. He'd used it as an excuse to ease the strange tension between him and Xuanmin. After all, Xuanmin had turned even more reticent than usual and hadn't spoken a word the entire journey.

To Xue Xian's surprise, before he could glare at Xuanmin for long, the monk glanced at Xue Xian and covered his eyes with one hand.

Xuanmin's palm wasn't soft. His lean fingers pressed against Xue Xian's brow and nose bridge. Somehow, though he had sweated profusely all night under the dragon saliva's influence, his hand remained dry and clean. It carried the faint scent of wild grass and trees, light and warm.

Xue Xian felt like he'd dug his own grave. He'd meant to dispel the awkwardness, but Xuanmin's confusing gesture only made things stranger.

Back when Xue Xian had been a paper figure, Xuanmin had often covered Xue Xian's eyes—probably to stop him from seeing unsightly

things. In this form, the gesture carried a different weight.

Xue Xian didn’t hear Xuanmin coax or scold the bird, but after a moment, it flapped its wings twice and settled down. Locked obediently behind the darkness of Xuanmin’s palm, Xue Xian blinked once, his lashes brushing against the monk’s fingers.

Xuanmin’s fingertips twitched. He withdrew his hand, still avoiding Xue Xian’s gaze. Perhaps it truly was “out of sight, out of mind.”

“Enough. Let’s go,” Xuanmin said calmly.

The black bird behaved, clinging silently to Xuanmin’s shoulder. Every once in a while, it cast a fearful glance at Xue Xian before it darted its head away, as if it had remembered its place.

Xuanmin seemed to have done something else to it, for when they boldly walked into the village with the bird in tow, the villagers’ gazes no longer followed them.

“Where’d the ghost bird go? It vanished!”

“Right? It was just there…”

The villagers’ murmurs faded behind them. The bird’s antics had one benefit: Most early risers had gathered at the village entrance, leaving the deeper areas quiet and empty. Following the soldier’s directions, they reached the pond and crossed a simple narrow bridge.

A few steps in, they heard voices below the bridge. Without pausing, Xue Xian looked down and saw two women kneeling on the stone steps, washing clothes while chatting.

“Hahh, poor Old Uncle Li on the west end passed away yesterday,” sighed the woman in maroon winter clothes. “They say he hid a rope and hung himself by the bed. He was clutching a red embroidered jacket when he died.”

“Old Li? Hadn’t he been senile for five or six years? How’d he manage to find a rope?”

The maroon-clad woman shook her head. “After Aunt Li fell ill and passed years ago, their second son and the others, fearing the old man couldn’t bear it, lied to him. They took advantage of his dementia to say she’d gone to the county for treatment. You’ve heard about this, right?”

“I have. They said Old Li couldn’t even recall conversations from two days ago, right? Every day, he’d ask ‘Where’s your mother?’”

“Right. Well, two days ago, he seemed to regain some clarity and realized his son had lied. That his wife was long gone.” The woman sighed. “Previously, he might have been senile, but he could still keep himself going. But now he had no hope left, so he took his life when no one was watching.”

“Hahh… Some things are better left unknown…”

As the women talked, Xue Xian’s group crossed the bridge. The soldier froze in midair for a few seconds, hovering silently, before he caught up.

“We’re here…” His voice was hesitant as he pointed to a modest earthen house by the road. It had three rooms in total, two side by side and a smaller one that served as a kitchen.

Just as he spoke, one of the doors opened. Out stepped a plainly dressed woman with her hair pinned up, holding a colorful knotted cord with a dried turtle shell strung on it. After adjusting the knot, she stood on tiptoe to hang it on a nail by the door. She touched the shell and glanced outside.

For a moment, Xue Xian thought she’d seen them. But her gaze skimmed past where they stood before she turned toward the village entrance, then retreated into the kitchen.

“Let’s go over,” Xue Xian said.

When no reply came, he turned to find the soldier’s blurred face streaked with tears. As if sleepwalking, he followed them to the door but didn’t enter the kitchen. Instead, he drifted to the colorful cord and seemed to want to touch the turtle shell—but with no hands, he could only stare. Then, he turned toward the woman by the hearth.

“What’s the meaning of the cord?” Xue Xian asked.

After a long pause, the soldier suppressed a sob and answered.

“Turtles symbolize ‘return.’ It’s a local custom—if someone leaves and doesn’t come back, families hang these.” They were replaced monthly, woven from spring to winter.

“I…” The soldier gazed longingly at the woman enveloped in the kitchen’s warmth. Finally, he murmured, “I’ve changed my mind. Don’t let her see the tag.”

After so many years apart, he couldn’t get enough of her. He seemed reluctant when he looked at Xue Xian and Xuanmin. “Could you bury it outside the house instead?”

Studying his tear-streaked face, Xue Xian nodded. “Sure. You won’t regret it? Once we bury it, we’re leaving for good. If you change your mind later…no one can help you.”

“Mm. I’ll watch over her and my parents from here, guarding the door.” The soldier’s voice was low. “Without the tag, they can keep hoping…”

A veteran of countless battles, tough and unyielding, he’d shed blood and sweat but few tears. Now, his face twisted into an ugly shape as he bit back sobs.

After a long silence, he gathered himself and spoke to Xuanmin.

“I’ve heard of a medicine…one that lets you pledge your next life in advance. If I took it, in my state, would it still work?”

Xuanmin hesitated, but before he could answer, Xue Xian clicked his tongue. “Why are you mortals so obsessed with tying your next life, or the one after, to someone else? I’ve heard this before. Last time, it was also a soldier who rambled all night, asking if such miracles existed. Anything involving life and death is sinister, all right? The cost is unbearable. There are no free blessings!”

“Not necessarily,” the soldier said earnestly, surprising Xue Xian. “When I was young, Uncle Qu from our village said his hometown had a divine medicine. If planted on someone, it could pledge their next life and even bear the other’s misfortunes.” At Xue Xian’s indifference, he added, “Uncle Qu was from Langzhou, and that region produces strange things, so maybe it’s real?”

“Stop dreaming. It’s useless,” Xue Xian said bluntly.

The soldier deflated and bowed his head. “I know. I was just… wondering.”

Wait. Xue Xian frowned and hissed in surprise. “That sounded familiar. Where did you say that person was from?”

The soldier’s voice was muffled, some words unclear.

Xue Xian’s eyes narrowed as he repeated what he’d made out. “Uncle Qu? Langzhou’s Mount Xia?”

Langzhou. Mount Xia. A divine medicine that could bear another’s misfortunes…

Two such coincidences were much too much. Xue Xian’s gaze flicked to Xuanmin’s neck, then to his eyes.

“Let’s find that man,” Xue Xian said, turning his face away.

Learning more about the divine medicine might help unravel the mystery of Xuanmin’s Life-Sharing Spider.

Without delay, they honored the soldier’s request, quietly burying the tag outside the house before heading deeper into the village to find this Uncle Qu.

Meanwhile, on the mountain path not far from the village, a long procession had halted.

It was the group from the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, having circled back. In the lead were the young man and woman still—the chief ritualist and chief diviner.

Adjusting his mask, the chief ritualist glanced at the chief diviner, who was recasting her divination.

“Well? Did that man use another illusion? Or has he moved overnight?”

One couldn’t divine the same matter twice in a day, so their knowledge was still based on last night’s results. After detouring to another mountain, they’d sensed something amiss and returned to Mount Boji. This time, the chief diviner remained silent for so long that the chief ritualist grew uneasy.

“That man was indeed on Mount Boji. There’s no mistake this time, no interference…but…” The chief diviner hesitated. “He’s dead.”

“Dead?” The chief ritualist’s voice rose in surprise.

“But that’s not what puzzles me most.”

“What *else*?”

“Remember when I mentioned someone who might be the state preceptor?”

“Of course, but surely that was a coincidence.”

“Unfortunately, my divination shows he was also in that mountain valley—and left not long ago.”

One coincidence was plausible. Two were harder to dismiss. The chief ritualist stiffened. “It couldn’t…really be him? Where is he now?”

The chief diviner pointed south. In the dim dawn light, they could see a village quietly nestled there. “In that village.”

Through the eyeholes of their masks, they exchanged a glance. The chief diviner briskly took paper and brush from her saddlebag, moistened the ink, and penned a brief letter. Meanwhile, the chief ritualist whistled, summoning a pigeon.

The letter was addressed to the state preceptor, stamped with the chief diviner’s seal, and sent to Famen Temple via pigeon.

“Even with the letter, we should verify things in person. This concerns the state preceptor. We can’t afford carelessness,” the chief ritualist said.

“Mm.” The chief diviner nodded.

Though hastily written, the letter wasn’t rash. The chief diviner never mentioned the person resembling the state preceptor, since doing so would border on disrespect.

No one in the Court of Imperial Sacrifices would have dared be so presumptuous. In their minds, the state preceptor was perpetually solemn; his very presence exuded an untouchable, unapproachable aura. Even though the chief diviner, chief ritualist, and others had been brought to the temple by him as children, he remained lofty and infallible all these years later.

“Your letter…” The chief ritualist tugged his reins, hesitating before he left.

The chief diviner didn’t need him to finish. “I’m not that foolish. I only mentioned that the person we were ordered to find is dead. If the pigeon encounters no delays, it should reach Famen Temple by tomorrow night. The day after at latest. The state preceptor will arrange matters upon reading it. Until then, we’ll act as circumstances dictate.”

Their abilities were limited, so messenger pigeons were their only option. On the other hand, the state preceptor could reply with a message in a single, instantaneous flame. They’d know whether he was still at Famen Temple in two days.

“In truth, once we enter the village and meet that person, we’ll have our answer,” the chief ritualist murmured. “No one can impersonate the state preceptor.”

While the temple members lived and trained together, the state preceptor preferred solitude, residing year-round in Tianji Institute. Strictly speaking, they weren’t his true disciples, but they were the ones who saw him most often. From childhood to adulthood, they’d grown intimately familiar with his mannerisms and aura. Without any exaggeration, these two could instantly spot him in a crowd, even if he were masked and disguised among hundreds or thousands of people dressed the same way. The letter was a formality to cover their bases, for their own peace of mind.

They exchanged a glance and urged their horses forward without delay. In a clatter of hoofbeats, the procession rode toward the small village south of the mountain.

Deep within the village, a solitary hut rested beneath the branches of an old loquat tree. From its low eaves hung two heavy strings of garlic and vibrant red peppers, strung together with an intricately braided hemp rope. The design of the braid seemed purposeful—the string hadn’t been done only for drying. Up close, the rope carried a pungent, smoky odor.

This was the home of the soldier’s Uncle Qu.

Xue Xian walked to the door but didn’t knock right away. Instead, he wrinkled his nose and leaned in to sniff the ropes. “It’s blood. Old blood.” Xue Xian covered his face with his sleeve.

As always, Xuanmin found such things disgusting. He reached out and tugged the nosy dragon away from the hemp rope, as if another

moment near it would contaminate Xue Xian with the smell.

The two remained beneath their illusion and thus invisible and inaudible to most. But right as Xuanmin pulled Xue Xian away, a man in a thick coat passed by Uncle Qu's house, leading a child that barely reached his waist. The child glanced curiously at the hut, only for the man to steer him away as if trying to avoid some plague.

"How many times must I tell you? Stop loitering here whenever you can," the man scolded.

"Oh," the child said. He obediently ducked his head and followed the man, but couldn't resist peeking backward.

Soon enough, a mother and child who had been watching the commotion at the village entrance earlier passed by the front of the house. The woman nodded a greeting to the approaching father and son. Then, like him, she steered her child a few paces away from Uncle Qu's hut.

"Seems this 'Uncle Qu' isn't too popular," Xue Xian muttered.

He'd planned to knock once the passersby left, but just then, the hut's cracked wooden door creaked open. A thin-lipped old man peered out, squinting as he scanned the area before fixing his milky, unfocused eyes where Xue Xian and Xuanmin stood. Though his vision seemed poor, Xue Xian sensed he could see—or at least feel—them.

"Who's there? What're you doing just standing by the door? I'm gonna shut it if you don't come in," the old man shouted, his speech slurred. He was probably a little hard of hearing himself, because his voice was booming, loud enough to reach the ears of the two parents making a detour.

"Quick, let's go. Old Qu's about to have one of his fits," the man muttered, dragging his child away. The mother did the same with hers. In moments, the area around the house was deserted.

"Bah!" Old Qu was clearly an ill-tempered man. He held the door for a moment, but when no one came in, he grumbled and moved to shut it.

Just before it closed, Xue Xian stopped it with a hand. "Pardon us. We're seeking shelter from the wind."

Old Qu was a little wary. "Human or ghost?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued loudly. "No, can't be a ghost. My protective charms

are right there. Even ghosts wouldn't dare. Who are you? What do you want?"

"To ask you something."

Old Qu was still holding the door, barring them from entry. "What?"

Xue Xian wasn't too concerned about entering the house. It was rather small, and he and Xuanmin would have to stoop to get inside. If he could get his answers at the door, it would save them the trouble of hunching over. "So, I hear you're from around Mount Xia in Langzhou?"

Old Qu nodded. "That's right. What of it?"

"Earlier, we escorted a young man home. He mentioned hearing from you that Mount Xia has many extraordinary medicines."

The old man listened curiously, then stroked his chin for a while. Eventually, he released the door. "Come inside first. Standing's tiresome—my legs can't take it."

Old Qu, it appeared, was a long-time recluse. His house was in shambles, and the air within was sour, like it hadn't been aired out in ages. As if the unpleasant staleness wasn't bad enough, the pungent odor of garlic was also mixed in. He let go, and as the door swung open, the indescribable stench slammed right into Xue Xian's nose.

Maybe we should just talk outside…

Grimacing, he held his breath, ducked inside, and yanked Xuanmin in after him. While Old Qu fumbled for a seat, Xue Xian grabbed Xuanmin's sleeve, pressing it to his nose for a deep sniff.

Much better.

Xuanmin stared at Xue Xian, but he didn't tell him to stop.

Old Man Qu wasn't exactly the hospitable type. He didn't invite the two to sit, and in truth, there weren't many places in his house where one *could* sit.

"What kind of miracle medicine are you asking about?" He settled into a chair padded with thick cloth, squinting as he spoke. "Langzhou has plenty of caterpillar fungus. It's not unusual to find extraordinary remedies there."

“Are there any that can prolong life or alter fate?” Xue Xian probed.

Old Man Qu gave them a sidelong glance and, after a long pause, said more. “There are rumors of such medicines, but they aren’t the same. There are supposedly two types, extremely similar in appearance but with opposite effects. One can extend life, while the other can shorten it. There are even whispers that one of them can bind people for three lifetimes—though no one knows which one. In any case, someone like me would never have the fortune to witness it. Whether it’s true or not is all hearsay.”

Xue Xian pressed on. “Do you know where that kind of medicine would grow?”

Old Man Qu didn’t disappoint; he had a specific location. “Baichong Cave!”

Xue Xian nodded. “That’ll do. Do the locals all know where Baichong Cave is? If they do, we can ask again once we reach Mount Xia.”

“Not a chance!” Old Man Qu waved his hand dismissively. “If you actually go asking around, I guarantee hardly anyone will be able to tell you.”

Xue Xian frowned. “Why?”

“You have no idea how venomous the insects in that area are. Just hearing the name ‘Baichong Cave’ would be enough to scare the life out of them. Besides, who would bother with such ‘believe it or not’ rumors?” Old Man Qu said. “The only reason I know is because my ancestors were witch doctors who loved dabbling in those things. To be honest, you’ve asked the right person. I’m probably the only one who can point you in the right direction.”

He raised his hand and traced a path on his other palm with his index finger. “Once you reach Mount Xia, go this way. Circle around to the southwestern mountain pass. There are three peaks there. One of the mountaintops has a twisted cliff. Baichong Cave is somewhere nearby. As for whether you need to jump off the cliff or what, I’m not sure. If you’ve got the luck, try every method.”

Luck? That was the one thing Xue Xian had in abundance. He scoffed to himself, thinking it really wasn’t much trouble. At worst, he

could comb the entire cliffside. It wouldn't be too difficult for him and Xuanmin.

Truth be told, if the rumors had just been about medicine, Xue Xian wouldn't have believed it so easily. But because it was "Baichong Cave"—*hundred insects cave*—they might have hit the mark. After all, the thing that had afflicted Xuanmin was called the "Life-Sharing Spider." Wasn't that related to insects?

Prolonging or altering one's fate with one insect or arachnid was patently ridiculous. However, if those creatures were used to cultivate a gu,[1] then enhanced through some kind of talisman array or dark arts, it might have some effect. The only thing was, such creations usually only benefited one party, while the others afflicted by the creation suffered immensely.

Now that they had a location, the two didn't linger. Before they departed, Xue Xian glanced over the aged, decaying furnishings in the room and tossed a golden bead into a cloth bag hanging behind the door as payment for the information.

Old Man Qu was eccentric but not unpleasant. He didn't ask what Xue Xian and Xuanmin intended to do, nor did he see them off when they bade farewell. Nonetheless, just as Xue Xian pulled open the wooden door and went to step outside, Old Man Qu murmured something else.

"Still, I'd advise you—even if you find that thing, it's best not to use it. My ancestors said there was a lovesick fool who wanted to extend his life or bind his next lifetime. Can't quite remember. Either way, he suffered nothing but misery, living a life worse than death. Who knows what he was thinking…"

The words tumbled out in a jumble, as if he were sleep talking. After speaking, he chuckled at himself. "Then again, I've said this to many people, and no one believes me. They all say I'm mad. Take it as you've heard it. Go on, go on. I'll have another nap."

Xue Xian replied nonchalantly, waving at Old Man Qu. "I'm not that bored. Besides, if I extended my life any further, wouldn't that be overkill?" He nudged Xuanmin out the door.

With their information in hand, the two delayed no further. They followed the intersecting village paths toward the exit. As they passed the

pond on their way out, Xue Xian inadvertently glanced into the distance and saw the wounded soldier standing rigidly in front of the door, as if prepared to remain there until his hair turned white in sixty years. Whether it was the “lovesick fool” Old Man Qu had mentioned or the wounded soldier weeping in anguish, Xue Xian had never felt such intense emotions. The motivation behind their actions were something he struggled to empathize with.

Like Xue Xian had mentioned to the wounded soldier, roughly sixty or seventy years ago, he’d encountered a different soldier in a large desert far to the north.

Xue Xian had gone there to bring rain in accordance with the natural order. When he arrived, he saw fierce winds whipping up sandstorms, with countless bones littering the ground. Burnt-out chariots, tattered battle flags, and rusted, broken armor stretched for miles.

That soldier had been sitting alone by a chariot, one leg bent, his foot propped on an upturned wheel, his head resting on his hand as he stared at a tattered flag beside him. With one glance, Xue Xian knew he was a wandering ghost that had been dead for almost a year. The others had long since moved on; only this one lingered, for reasons unknown.

Xue Xian was languid by nature and not particularly compassionate. He’d intended to ignore the ghost and leave after bringing the rain, but then the lonely spirit had called out to him.

The ghost, having wandered for so long, had been disoriented. He rambled away, not caring who Xue Xian was, spilling his thoughts like scattered beans. Like the wounded soldier, the ghost’s words had been disjointed and hard to follow.

Xue Xian let his mood dictate his actions. That day, perhaps because he was moved by the sight of bones strewn across the wilderness, his patience had been a little better than usual. He allowed the ghost to go on for a long time. The soldier's chatter boiled down to two things: "If only we had won this battle" and "I don't dare move on."

"You're not afraid of death, so why fear reincarnation?" Xue Xian asked. The ghost's incoherent musing continued for a while longer before Xue Xian had eked out an understanding.

The ghost was afraid that once he moved on, he'd have to live his next life, but his wife was still in this lifetime. He feared that leaving meant he'd never see her again.

"Staying won't give you that chance either," Xue Xian said. "You're bound here. You can't leave."

The ghost gave him a mournful look. With much gesturing, he explained further. It wouldn't be so painful if he could remember to look for her in his next life. If they were fated to be together, it'd be best for them to meet in childhood, for him to watch her grow from a little girl into a young woman, then marry her. There was no need for the life-and-death drama of operas—just an ordinary, peaceful life would do. And preferably, no more wars.

Xue Xian, looking at the bones scattered across the land, listened to the ghost's sentimental monologue. Surprisingly, he didn't find it annoying.

As he left, he casually tossed the ghost a long cord.

"What's the rope for? I'm already dead. I don't need to hang myself," the ghost said woodenly.

"Just wrap it around your left wrist and mark yourself," Xue Xian retorted. "Didn't you say you wanted to find her in your next life? Though it won't help you remember these trivial things, having a mark might make it more obvious. Maybe if your longing is strong enough, you'll really find her."

The ghost had lingered for so long solely due to this small wish. Now that it had been resolved, he didn't stay any longer. When Xue Xian departed, the ghost also went on his way.

Seeing the wounded soldier standing vigil had reminded Xue Xian of that ghost. Many years had passed, and he still couldn't understand those types of lingering emotions after death. However, as his old memories surfaced, Xue Xian subconsciously peeked at Xuanmin.

Xuanmin, hardly a step ahead, noticed Xue Xian's pause. "What?"

Xue Xian snapped out of his thoughts and realized his gaze had settled on Xuanmin's shoulders and back.

"Oh," he said, looking away. "Nothing. Just remembered a passerby."

"A passerby?" Xuanmin looked toward the pond, then at Xue Xian.

But Xue Xian's attention had already shifted to the road ahead. "Let's go. We're almost out—wait, someone's there!"

They had just passed the village boundary stone and dispelled the concealment spell. They would be on the mountain path once they rounded the bend. But before Xue Xian had finished speaking, he'd spotted a long, pale procession standing on the path ahead.

"Whose funeral has such a grand procession?" Xue Xian muttered, just as he noticed flags beside the carriages in the procession, bearing two characters: *Taichang*.

It was the Court of Imperial Sacrifices.

Chapter 30:
A Vow of Three Lifetimes

BOTH XUE XIAN AND XUANMIN HALTED. Xue Xian hadn't yet made out the faces of the newcomers when he heard a clear, crisp female voice say: "Dismount."

Immediately, the hundred or so people dismounted in unison and bowed deeply to them.

Xue Xian was surprised. What kind of show was this?

The Court of Imperial Sacrifices had long-established rules: They only knelt to heaven and earth. Thus, even when meeting the state preceptor, they greeted with a bow, not kneeling. The sight of a hundred people in wide-sleeved white robes, wearing masks patterned with fierce and ancient beasts, silently and uniformly bowing in perfect sync was still a spectacular sight. The grandeur carried a solemn, reverent air. If each of them had been holding incense, it would've looked like a ceremony to worship the heavens.

For ordinary people, this scene would've been plenty grand, but it wasn't special to Xue Xian. He was only momentarily stunned because the sight was so unexpected. He rarely paid attention to mortal court affairs, and he couldn't be bothered to learn the ever-changing official titles and institutions across dynasties, since they had nothing to do with him. When he saw *The Court of Imperial Sacrifices* on their flags, he felt nothing. However, based on the attire of these hundred or so people, he guessed they were officials in charge of rituals and divination. Over the many years of his life, he'd become familiar with such displays.

He almost blurted out: *Have you chased me all the way here to beg for rain?*

Xuanmin, standing beside Xue Xian, frowned and took a small step forward before he could speak. He was now partially shielding Xue Xian from the newcomers. With a frosty expression, he looked over the group critically.

“What business do you have?”

What business?!

At the front of the procession, the chief diviner and the chief ritualist, who had just been about to greet the state preceptor, froze in place.

Fortunately, having grown up in the imperial court, they didn’t lose their composure. Maintaining their bows, they exchanged a glance, their eyes filled with shock and confusion.

Had they mistaken his identity? Impossible! His stature, bearing, and gait were unmistakably the state preceptor’s. They didn’t even need to wait for him to approach—they could recognize him in one glance.

Then, what was his proclamation about? Was it deliberate? Perhaps he was on important business and couldn’t reveal his identity?

The chief diviner and chief ritualist had entered the Court of Imperial Sacrifices in the same year. One could say that, after growing up together, they were childhood friends. If nothing else, they shared a tacit understanding. With a brief exchange of a few more glances, they arrived at the same suspicion.

Just as this thought emerged for both of them, a faint hissing sound came from beside them. Startled, they looked down and saw that the source was a small flame that had appeared near the chief diviner’s fingers. The flame vanished in an instant, leaving behind a slip of paper in its wake.

This wasn’t unfamiliar to them. When the state preceptor needed to send a message, he often used this method. Logically, the carrier pigeon the chief diviner had sent couldn’t have reached Famen Temple and returned so quickly. The only explanation was that the state preceptor had coincidentally sent another message…

The chief diviner discreetly picked up the folded slip of paper, but as she unfolded it, the sound of flapping wings came from behind her.

“Another message,” the chief ritualist said. He turned to retrieve the new note from a pigeon that had just landed.

The two looked askance at each other and hurriedly read the notes.

“This one’s from the vice minister,” the chief ritualist whispered. “He says Huazhi County reported sightings of a true dragon. The state preceptor

has issued orders—the entire Court of Imperial Sacrifices and the outer court guards of the Tianji Institute have set out. He wants us to keep an eye out here first."

Though he kept his voice low, his tone rose slightly at the mention of "true dragon," betraying his surprise. He quickly lowered his voice again. "Also, the Vice Minister says the state preceptor has left seclusion for urgent matters and will rendezvous with us in three days."

As for the note from the state preceptor, it was as concise as ever. The chief diviner held it up for the chief ritualist to see. Five words were written on it: *Act as you see fit.* The signature, as always, was *Tongdeng*.

The two messages that had arrived one after the other weren't particularly long, but their contents were puzzling. Why would the entire Court of Imperial Sacrifices and Tianji Institute mobilize just because someone in Huazhi County claimed to have seen a true dragon? Nothing like that had ever happened before. The scale of the response was unusual, stirring a sense of unease. However, what concerned the chief diviner and chief ritualist most wasn't this. It was the fact that the state preceptor *had* left seclusion for urgent matters…

They couldn't help but connect this to their current situation, confirming their earlier guess: The state preceptor must have had his reasons—hidden circumstances or other arrangements that prevented him from acknowledging them. In that case, they had to cooperate fully. Ruining the state preceptor's plans? That was suicidal.

"Act as you see fit…" the chief ritualist muttered. And act they would! The two quickly composed themselves and nodded at Xuanmin and Xue Xian.

"A misunderstanding. We must've mistaken you for someone else," the chief diviner said.

"Mistaken us?" Xue Xian chuckled and brushed some nonexistent dust from his sleeve. "Can I really take that at face value?"

Though the two groups were some distance apart, Xue Xian had caught the mention of "true dragon." If the other party had been up-front about their purpose, he wouldn't have minded, but their immediate claim of mistaken identity was suspicious.

What kind of person needed to hide their identity? Someone with ulterior motives.

Xue Xian usually couldn't be bothered to decipher mortal scheming, but he'd been burned once before. The sight of such evasiveness reminded him of his stripped tendons and bones, and his smile turned cold.

"Our apologies for the rudeness. The mountain path is winding, and we didn't get a clear look when you rounded the bend. We mistook you for someone else based on your attire and stature. A foolish error," the chief ritualist said, not daring to look directly at Xuanmin and instead cupping his hands toward Xue Xian. "We beg your forgiveness. Since you're in a hurry, we won't delay you further. Please—"

With that, he gestured to the procession behind him. The hundred or so people parted like waves, forming a neat path for Xue Xian and Xuanmin to pass through.

Xue Xian let out a short snicker but said nothing more. He strode forward without hesitation. He and Xuanmin walked together down the opened path. Both were fearless to the core, so they showed no discomfort despite the unusual circumstances. Their expressions were calm, their steps unhurried.

Before Xuanmin reached them, the chief diviner and chief ritualist lowered their eyes, just as they would have in the Court of Imperial Sacrifices when facing the state preceptor. They didn't dare look directly at him under normal circumstances, and they seemed to have caused trouble, making the situation awkward.

They kept their eyes firmly downcast and tried not to think of how they had nearly gone against the state preceptor's wishes.

However, as Xuanmin passed by, the chief diviner couldn't help but glance briefly toward Xuanmin's hanging right hand, though she quickly looked away.

Apart from this momentary lapse in composure, the two otherwise behaved appropriately—respectful but not overly deferential. They stole a few discreet glances at Xue Xian though, as if worried this troublesome-looking man might notice something amiss.

But that was a mistake. Others might not have noticed their surreptitious looks, but Xue Xian's senses were far too sharp. He easily detected their shifting gazes. To him, these people might as well have painted *We have ulterior motives!* on their faces and paraded through the streets. And for a brief moment, he sensed something else odd.

Before the thought could fully form, it was interrupted by the black bird on Xuanmin's shoulder. The bird was utterly fearless. Instead of being alarmed by the "funeral procession," it spread its wings and smacked Xue Xian's shoulder when he got too close.

Little beast!

Xue Xian glared at it, only to see Xuanmin placidly slap another talisman on it. This one seemed to be for immobilization. The bird stiffened into a wooden board on Xuanmin's shoulder, unmoving. Its beady black gaze was pitiful as it stared at Xuanmin.

Xue Xian felt terribly pleased and stopped pondering the ulterior motives of the procession.

The chief diviner and chief ritualist watched as the two men and the bird walked through the parted crowd. Eventually, they passed the last horse and reached the fork in the mountain path ahead.

The chief ritualist exhaled softly, already formulating a plan. To avoid hindering the state preceptor, they would pretend to take a different path, continue onward, and then circle back by a side route to follow them from an unobtrusive distance. That way, they could provide support if needed.

The chief ritualist hadn't finished his exhalation when the slender, black-clad man beside the state preceptor turned and smirked at them. The smirk was both breathtakingly beautiful and unnervingly sinister, carrying a chilling edge as it curled the corner of his lips. The chief diviner and chief ritualist stiffened in alarm.

In the next instant, the sky above the Court of Imperial Sacrifices' procession darkened. The faint daylight was swallowed by rolling black clouds, and hundreds of blinding lightning bolts shot down without warning, striking the ground with deafening cracks. Each bolt landed just

shy of their toes, forming a cage of thunder and lightning around the entire procession.

For the first time in their lives, the chief ritualist and his companions experienced the chaos of horses rearing and men tumbling off. The procession dissolved into utter disarray. Every lightning strike was precisely aimed—they never hit, but they were always close enough to force them to dodge away.

The lightning showed no sign of stopping, like it could continue endlessly. With their limited abilities, the members of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices were unable to escape this cage.

As the chief ritualist struggled to look around in the midst of the chaos, he realized the people he'd intended to follow had already vanished. The blinding lightning made it impossible to see which fork in the road they'd taken.

Just when he was about to panic, the chief diviner grabbed his arm.

"Don't worry. We'll catch up," she said.

By the time Xue Xian and Xuanmin returned to Qingping County, the sky was fully light. Unlike the thunderstorm at the foot of Mount Boji, the sunlight here was warm, a rare comfort in the depths of winter. The county seemed livelier than last time, with more people coming and going in the streets, as if they had finally emerged from the shadow of the plague to take a breath.

When the two arrived at the Fang family's back door, the household was already bustling. Herbalists and assistants were spreading medicinal herbs in the garden to dry in the rare sunshine. Beggars bustled about, clumsily but diligently helping. Old Chen and Fang Cheng were checking inventory, one calling out names while the other marked quantities with a vermilion brush.

Jiang Shijing was teaching a group of seven- or eight-year-old children. These were apprentices sent here by various families. Though young, they could already recite the properties of various herbs.

Aunt Chen chopped vegetables in the kitchen, with Xingzi assisting and occasionally running in and out. The twin brothers were busy in the front hall, while Jiang Shining, who couldn't be exposed to light, stayed

indoors proofreading a medical text his sister had copied. Shitou Zhang sat in a corner, carving small trinkets out of stone. At his feet was a row of thumb-sized rabbits and monkeys—evidence of his idle creativity.

The Fang family's backyard was spacious, but the crowd made it feel cramped. In the past, Xue Xian would've turned and left at the sight of such a scene. One Shitou Zhang buzzing in his ear was annoying enough, but a whole crowd? Unbearable. Though not as fastidious as Xuanmin, Xue Xian was inherently averse to noise. He could be as loud as he wanted, but others couldn't disturb him—such was his unreasonable logic.

Despite that, as he leaned against the doorframe, his lazy gaze swept over the yard, and he thought: *This kind of life isn't so bad.* For ordinary people, it was probably as perfect as it could get.

Xingzi, emerging from the kitchen, spotted Xue Xian and Xuanmin by the door. "Ah, Xue-gongzi is back!" she called out in delight.

"Little girl, you're so biased your heart's gone completely sideways. It's practically under your arm," said Shitou Zhang, teasing from nearby. "Didn't you see the master's figure too?"

Xingzi blushed and waved her hands. "No, no! I just hadn't gotten around to addressing him yet."

Shitou Zhang, though still absorbed in his carving, turned. "Did you two spend all night tidying up? Did you ever finish? Had I known it'd take so long, I'd have stayed another night to help."

Shitou Zhang, ever the blunt fool, managed to turn Xue Xian's face from pale to green with just one sentence.

For a moment, Xue Xian thought he sensed Xuanmin's eyes on him. However, when he spun around, Xuanmin was looking down as he stepped calmly into the yard.

Xue Xian narrowed his eyes at Shitou Zhang. The dragon did not like the feeling that he'd suddenly grown a weakness, and being poked over and over in his sore spot was driving him mad. The truth was, after all his years of carefree living, he'd never felt such emotional turbulence before.

Enough already!

Xue Xian's expression finally returned to normal. So what if he'd borrowed a hand? So what if he'd indulged himself? That was that. What of it?

Shitou Zhang had nearly wilted from being stared at that whole time. Luckily, he was sitting—if he'd been standing, he might've turned and fled. He smacked a hand over his own mouth.

"Should've kept quiet. Now you've made him glare at you," he muttered to himself. Not that he knew why such a simple sentence had provoked the temperamental wise one.

The others in the yard greeted Xue Xian and Xuanmin next. Xingzi, who'd been staring at Xue Xian's face in a daze, suddenly exclaimed and pointed at his now-functional legs. "You—!"

"Huh? Your legs are better?" Shitou Zhang, having learned nothing from past mistakes, said in surprise, "What kind of miracle medicine did you take, to recover overnight?"

Xue Xian narrowed his eyes again. "I suggest you stop talking if you want to stay safe."

What did I do wrong this time? Regardless, Shitou Zhang sealed his lips.

Shitou Zhang wasn't the only one oblivious to the implications of "overnight." In no time, the entire Fang household's attention was on Xue Xian's amazing recovery, and they bombarded him with questions. "Overnight" this, "overnight" that—Xue Xian almost felt like these people were here to collect a debt from him. All these mouths…

Fortunately, before he had to endure much more, he felt someone grasp his wrist gently but firmly.

"His legs have just recovered. He needs a few more hours of quiet cultivation to fully recuperate," Xuanmin interjected.

The crowd paused, then quickly agreed. "The master's right! He should rest and recover properly."

Without another word, Xuanmin guided Xue Xian by the wrist into their shared room and closed the door behind them.

The door shut out the noise from the rest of the house. This thin wooden barrier was miraculous—once closed, it created a separate world. Xue Xian's gaze dropped to the hand still holding his wrist.

The door was shut, yet Xuanmin hadn't let go.

He did eventually, after which he walked to the table and pulled out a chair.

"On the way back, your steps were unsteady, and your pulse was sluggish. Your recovery was rushed. You should rest and recuperate further."

So the delayed release was just to check my condition?

Xue Xian raised an eyebrow and averted his gaze. He stopped looking at Xuanmin and instead fiddled with the string of copper coins he'd yet to return, then brushed past the table Xuanmin was seated at to perch on the bed.

What Xuanmin said wasn't untrue, Xue Xian knew. His actual spine had yet to fully recover. His current mobility relied entirely on the threads condensed from the copper coins. A substitute was just a substitute. It couldn't last forever; already, it felt unstable. If he didn't replenish it with spiritual energy soon, the threads might snap, and he'd be paralyzed again. So he didn't dawdle and started to meditate with the copper coins.

At first, the spiritual energy flowing through the coins circulated through his meridians as usual, nourishing the threads connecting his broken bones and encouraging their fractured ends to grow a little. Before long, another stream of warm spiritual energy flowed through the coins into his bones and tendons, merging with the original stream to soothe his injuries.

Xue Xian cracked an eye open and saw that Xuanmin had also closed his eyes, one hand forming a Buddhist mudra as if cultivating something. Clearly, the second stream of energy had come from him. Xue Xian closed his eyes again and focused on guiding both his and Xuanmin's energy through the coins over and over.

After a long while, the copper coins in Xue Xian's hand trembled. Though they made no sound, a metallic resonance traveled from his fingers to his bones and into his mind, as if something had clicked open.

He froze for a moment before realizing what had happened. Another of the five coins' restrictions had been lifted.

For an instant, he felt that with the lifting of this restriction, the connection between the coins and his body had grown stronger. As the coins hummed and vibrated, his mind seemed to vibrate along with them, pulling him uncontrollably into a dreamlike state. Though it was less a dream and more a series of fragments so blurry their outlines were barely discernible, like fish surfacing briefly in a pond before vanishing again.

He saw someone pacing in front of him. His perspective was strange; he couldn't see the person's torso, only the hem of their robes sweeping past like clouds. He opened his mouth slightly, as if uttering a brief word or perhaps just a name.

Then, he was seated at a desk somewhere, but he couldn't see what was on it. A black shadow fell beside his hand, and he seemed to twitch his fingers toward it.

Next, he held something that looked like a demon mask, a swirl of red and black, its features indistinct.

Just as Xue Xian was struggling to make sense of these fragments, he saw one last scene: a child with a blurred face standing before him. He bent down and reached out to the child. What gave him pause was that his sleeve was white. Spotlessly white.

The child looked up at him.

"Who are you?"

Their voice was blurred and indistinct, youthful yet timid.

Just as he was about to answer, he caught sight of his outstretched hand. On the side of his ring finger's knuckle was a tiny mole. Though the dream was hazy, the mole stood out against his pale, slender finger.

The shock of recognition jolted him awake. Xue Xian's eyes flew open. He stared at the figure by the table. Night had fallen without Xue Xian noticing, leaving the room dark. The faint glow of lanterns outside outlined Xuanmin's silhouette.

"Bald donkey," Xue Xian murmured, frowning.

Xuanmin made a sound of acknowledgment. His voice carried a faint trace of exhaustion, as if he had also just emerged out of a taxing state. From where Xue Xian sat, he saw Xuanmin raise a hand to touch his neck.

Though the room was too dark to see any details, Xue Xian remembered: On the knuckle of Xuanmin's ring finger was a small mole, exactly like the one in the dream.

Xue Xian had meant to tell Xuanmin about the dream, but seeing him touch his neck changed his mind.

Another thought struck Xue Xian. If that had just been a coincidental dream, he would have been fine talking about it. But what if it hadn't been a dream? There was an inexplicable connection between him and Xuanmin's copper coins, one that could transfer the effects of dragon saliva. Could it also transfer other things? Like…memories?

If he wasn't mistaken, each time a coin's restriction was lifted, Xuanmin regained some memories. During their earlier cultivation, one coin's restriction had been broken. What he'd seen… Could they have been fragments of Xuanmin's memories?

The connection was limited, making everything blurred, as if viewed from across a river. If they *were* memories, Xue Xian couldn't just outright ask about them. Xuanmin volunteering the information was one thing, but Xue Xian seeing it without his knowledge was another.

Xue Xian decided to wait until Xuanmin felt better before having a proper talk. For now, it was best not to use the coins recklessly, lest the connection deepen further.

When Xuanmin heard Xue Xian call his name but say nothing more, he turned.

"What is it?" His voice sounded better, like he'd mostly recovered.

"I'll return these coins for now. I don't need them anymore," Xue Xian said. He stood with a stretch, then placed the coins in Xuanmin's hand.

Out of habit, he'd hooked his finger through the coin string, so when he placed them in Xuanmin's palm, his finger was still caught in the loop. In the darkness, it almost seemed as if their hands were linked by that

slender cord. For a moment, as if bewitched, Xue Xian didn’t pull away—and neither did Xuanmin.

After a long pause, Xue Xian twitched his finger, not to free it but to tug lightly on the string. Gazing down at Xuanmin, he murmured, “You…”

Knock, knock, knock!

The sound of knocking suddenly echoed. A slender, frail figure was outlined through the paper-paneled door. Lu Nianqi’s dry voice came through: “Get up. The master of the house is celebrating his birthday. How could you sleep so late?”

Xue Xian’s fingers loosened, releasing the thin string.

“I almost forgot the date. Jiang Shijing invited us to a feast today. Let’s go.”

He and Xuanmin were esteemed guests in the eyes of the Fang family. Lu Nianqi was just the first to seek them out. As soon as Xue Xian opened the door, the entire Fang household, young and old, gathered around, ushering and inviting him and Xuanmin to the guest hall.

Seeing the table laden with delicacies rivaling those of fine restaurants, Xue Xian understood what Aunt Chen had been busy with, wielding her cleaver early in the morning. This was for a birthday celebration, but it wasn’t a milestone year. Jiang Shijing and Fang Cheng had merely used the occasion to gather everyone for a warm, familial feast.

With no outsiders present, the meal was lively and enjoyable. The first half was somewhat restrained by etiquette, but in the latter half, the twin brothers went wild, and the atmosphere became boisterous. Led by the Chen brothers, the group shamelessly teased Fang Cheng and Jiang Shijing before turning their mischief on Uncle and Aunt Chen.

Eventually, Aunt Chen scolded the two brothers and chased them back to their seats.

“Shameless! Eat your food. If you don’t settle down, I’ll feed you pig slop tomorrow!” she said, giving them a thorough dressing-down.

Fang Cheng, however, poured a small cup of wine, shooed away the rowdy youngsters, and smiled. Careful to hold back his sleeve, he lifted his cup to Jiang Shijing.

Jiang Shijing raised a finger in warning. “Just one cup.” Then, with a suppressed smile, she also lifted a small celadon wine cup.

“That’s fine. If I drink one cup a year, I can still drink eighty more,” Fang Cheng said solemnly.

“You’d be a monster by then!” Jiang Shijing laughed helplessly.

Jiang Shining, the ghost who couldn’t eat ordinary food, also smiled, his eyes crinkling.

Lazily watching the lively scene, Xue Xian swirled his wine cup. When he noticed something on Fang Cheng’s and Jiang Shijing’s exposed wrists, his eyes lingered.

Fang Cheng’s wrist bore a faint mark, like one left by a tight rope, and it looked oddly familiar. Jiang Shijing’s wrist also held a similar faint trace.

Jiang Shining happened to turn and notice Xue Xian’s staring. He leaned over. “What’re you looking at?”

Xue Xian gestured with his chin.

“Oh, mm,” Jiang Shining said, understanding. “That mark on my brother-in-law’s wrist is a birthmark—he’s had it since he was born. My sister’s is from an accidental bump when she was little. It’s actually from the first time she met him. The mark never faded, so it looks like they were destined to be.”

“Hmm,” Xue Xian responded, arcing one eyebrow as he sipped his wine. “Maybe it’s a mark from a past life…”

The lonely soul who’d wandered that desert of corpses had gotten his wish. He’d found the person he sought and was living the most ordinary and joyful of lives.

“Eighty is too few! Maybe the count can continue in the next life,” Fang Cheng said. He tapped his cup lightly against Jiang Shijing’s. “Consider this a promise. Don’t go back on it a hundred years from now.”

With that, he downed the cup in one gulp.

Some connections in this world defied explanation. Sometimes, the connections didn’t even have a clear beginning, yet they tugged at the

heartstrings, seeped into the bones, and endured from youth to old age—unbroken for a century, unchanged for three lifetimes.

Xue Xian swallowed his wine, a smirk playing on his lips. He glanced to his side and saw Xuanmin looking back, then he lifted his teacup for a sip.

ARC 5

NO REGRETS

Chapter 31:
Finger Mole

OUTSIDE THE SOUTHWESTERN CORNER of Qingping County's city walls, past Mount Boji, there was an ancient river that flowed straight into the great Yangtze, locally known as Yeya Moor.

This river had been the subject of countless legends in Qingping since ancient times. It was said to house a river god who blessed the surrounding farmland with favorable weather and bountiful fish. There were even tales of people who tried to fill the river to build houses, only to see their constructions collapse repeatedly.

Over time, the stories grew more fantastical, and the locals built a temple to the river god by the riverbank for worship and offerings, seeking peace of mind. But Yeya—*wild ducks*—Moor was still a wild and desolate place, true to its name. While the temple saw occasional visitors during the day, it was deserted at night and a perfect setting for ghostly tales, dark and silent.

On this night, unlike most, the river god temple was lit by candles deep into the evening. Two oil lamps flickered faintly at the feet of the stone statue of the river god, casting a dim yellow glow over the room. Two figures sat on the soft cushions inside: a somewhat plump middle-aged man and a thin, frail-looking boy.

A young monk in snow-white robes stood by the candles. Using the light, he smoothed out a yellow sheet of paper on the incense table. As he held back his sleeve, he dipped his brush in ink and wrote a few characters on the paper:

Jiang Shining?

Year of Bingyin, Seventh Day of the Eighth Month

On an old tree by the temple gate, a man in black sat on a thick, gnarled branch. He leaned against the trunk with one knee bent and the other dangling lazily. His pale face was warmed by the faint light from the

temple, softening the sharp contours of his handsome features and lending him an uncharacteristically gentle air.

It was Xue Xian.

That night, the Fang household had stayed up unusually late. Young and old alike had indulged in a bit of wine, then drifted into a tipsy slumber. Xue Xian and the others had left after everyone had gone to bed.

“Aren’t you afraid your sister will scold you every time she burns paper offerings for you in the future?” Xue Xian rested his elbow on his knee, idly toying with a leaf hanging near his hand.

Jiang Shining stood under the tree and shook his head as he looked up at Xue Xian. “My sister has a soft heart. I can’t bear to see her sad.”

Xue Xian plucked two leaves and began folding them in his hands. “Yet you could bear to leave without saying goodbye?”

“If I didn’t leave at night, I’d never get away during the day. If she cried in front of me, I’d be helpless.” Jiang Shining smiled. “Brief pain is better than prolonged pain. I had to leave eventually. I left her a letter.”

Xue Xian nodded. “Fair enough. She’s your sister, not mine.” He tilted his head and studied the frail scholar under the tree. “Are you sure about this? There’s no turning back.”

“Yes. My parents have moved on, and my sister is doing well. I have no regrets left. It’s time to go. A proper ghost shouldn’t linger in the mortal world.”

Indeed, lingering too long made reincarnation difficult, and that was no good.

“All feasts must come to an end.” Jiang Shining looked down at his hands and body, then turned to scan the faces of those who had traveled with him to the temple.

Finally, his gaze settled on Xue Xian. The three years he had spent drifting in the ruins of the Jiang family clinic seemed like a fleeting dream, already fading from memory. But he remembered vividly the moment he had looked up from the tall weeds in the corner of the house and seen the pale, black-robed young man, whose striking features exuded arrogance. Since then, Jiang Shining had gained a paper body, found his parents’

shattered souls, traveled far across the river, written a long letter, and properly bidden farewell to his sister.

“It just occurred to me,” Jiang Shining said to Xue Xian, “I don’t think I’ve ever properly thanked you.”

Xue Xian scoffed. “For what?”

There was too much to thank him for. Far more than a few words could convey. Jiang Shining simply smiled.

Xuanmin looked over from inside the temple and nodded at Jiang Shining before lighting the folded yellow paper in his hand. A long incense stick smoldered amid the flames.

The yellow paper slowly burned to ash, and the incense dwindled section by section. Jiang Shining’s figure grew fainter. In the thin haze of smoke, he bowed deeply toward Xuanmin, then turned and clasped his hands in a salute to Xue Xian.

Xue Xian watched the ghost’s fading outline, his narrowed eyes a little unfocused. “Getting sentimental all of a sudden? Trying to butter me up so I’ll remember to burn you some paper money later?”

“No need to burn me paper money. I wouldn’t be able to repay you anyway.”

Jiang Shining just wanted to borrow the temple’s incense smoke to wish everyone a lifetime of peace. After all, this farewell was his last.

The last section of incense ash fell, and Jiang Shining’s figure vanished completely.

Xue Xian stared at the spot where Jiang Shining had disappeared for a moment before dropping down from the tree. His black robes fluttered and settled with a soundless brush over the grass as he landed.

He walked to the temple entrance but didn’t step inside. Watching Xuanmin adjust the candlewick by the incense table, he felt a strange, inexplicable pang of regret stirring in his chest.

Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian in the candlelight before looking away. Calmly, he folded the talisman paper holding the ashes of the yellow paper and incense, then swept his sleeve over it. A flame from the candle stand landed on the folded paper, transforming it into a simple river lantern.

Holding the lantern, Xuanmin strode toward Xue Xian. The temple floor was slightly raised from the ground; Xuanmin paused at the threshold and handed the lantern to Xue Xian.

His serene eyes met Xue Xian's until they quickly flickered away. "This river is called Ping'an—*peace*." It could soothe wandering souls and guide lost ghosts.

Xue Xian took the lantern and studied Xuanmin for a few seconds. Suddenly, Xuanmin reached out and touched the side of Xue Xian's face.

The warmth of his fingers made Xue Xian's eyes waver. But the touch was gone as soon as it came.

"A dead leaf," Xuanmin said flatly. He crushed the withered leaf he had plucked from Xue Xian's temple into dust and scattered it on the soil by the door.

Xue Xian lowered his gaze. "Hmm." Still holding the lantern, he walked to the riverbank, then set the lantern afloat on the ancient waters. The tiny flame drifted away with the current, as if escorting the departed to the other shore.

Abruptly, Xue Xian realized what his regret had been about. Watching Jiang Shining vanish had stirred a rare emotion in him—the sense of sudden absence. Though Jiang Shining had never been loud or bothersome, his disappearance made the surroundings feel emptier, quieter.

All revelry must come to an end. Nothing was eternal. Given Xue Xian's near-immortality, he would inevitably watch others grow old and pass away, never to meet again, including Xuanmin…

Xue Xian frowned, finding the thought unbearably unpleasant. Now, *that* was a sensation beyond mere regret.

Meanwhile, atop a low hill south of the river temple, a group of people sat quietly in the night, resting and recuperating. In the faint moonlight, their white robes were tattered and their appearances disheveled, as if they had just escaped a dire predicament.

This group was none other than the party from the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, who'd been trapped by Xue Xian's lightning cage at the foot of Mount Boji. They were resting on the mountaintop, drawing spiritual energy from the moonlight and the mountain, but not a single lantern was lit among them. It was as if they were deliberately hiding their presence.

"Are you sure that's them?" The chief ritualist, having removed his mask for once, smoothed his hair and nodded toward a distant glimmer of light in the wilderness.

"Absolutely," the chief diviner replied.

From their vantage point, they could barely make out the faint glow of the river temple and couldn't confirm who was there. All their

information came from the chief diviner's divinations.

Though they had been outmaneuvered the previous night, the chief diviner's predictions were rarely wrong. If she was certain, the chief ritualist could relax a little.

"But…" The chief ritualist fiddled with the edge of his mask. "I still have some doubts."

The chief diviner turned to him. "What?"

"We were flustered earlier and overlooked something. When we met the state preceptor at the foot of Mount Boji and bowed to greet him, we received his letter." The chief ritualist frowned. "Did you see him send it?"

They had witnessed the state preceptor sending letters twice before. It was said that the moment he burned the letter, the recipient would receive it almost instantly, so there was no chance of a delay.

At the time, the chief ritualist hadn't dared lift his head, let alone see the state preceptor burn anything.

"Maybe he burned it just before rounding the mountain bend, and we received it after he appeared," the chief diviner speculated. She added firmly, "There's no need to doubt. That was definitely the state preceptor. When he left, I made sure to look at his fingers."

The chief ritualist blinked. "His fingers?"

Though members of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices had more opportunities to see the state preceptor than most, even those who had grown up in the temple since childhood rarely got close to him. He disliked having people near him. Few knew the finer details of his appearance, such as whether he had moles or scars.

But the chief diviner knew one thing…

It was from her initial encounter with the state preceptor. She'd been seven, a scrawny, malnourished child. Her family was poor, her father long dead, and her mother gravely ill, on the verge of passing. Kneeling by the bed in their dilapidated home, weeping in the cold wind and rain, she had been startled when a monk knocked on the door.

That had been her first glimpse of the state preceptor—tall, dressed in pristine white robes, his silver mask obscuring his face. From her vantage

point, she could only see his sharp jawline.

Then, he'd bent down and extended a hand to her. His hand was beautiful, perfectly proportioned, and so clean it seemed untouched by any impurity. Despite his silver mask, she felt certain he was the most beautiful person she would ever see.

Her tears had stopped in her shock. Peering up at him, she'd asked, "Who are you?"

His voice had been deep and soothing, instantly calming her: "This humble monk goes by the Dharma name Tongdeng. I've come to take you to the Court of Imperial Sacrifices."

She had stared at that slender, elegant hand and nodded dazedly before she processed his words.

From then on, her life had taken a different path. After the many events she'd witnessed in the years that followed, her impression of the state preceptor had diverged sharply from that first awestruck encounter. Now, it was dominated more by reverence and caution than admiration. But she still remembered every detail of that childhood meeting. She would remember it for the rest of her life.

Seeing her lost in thought, the chief ritualist pressed her. "What about the state preceptor's fingers?"

"There's a tiny mole on the side of his ring finger's knuckle," the chief diviner said, returning to the present. "I saw it when I first met him and never forgot it. At Mount Boji, I made sure to look for it. I'm certain there's no mistake. It's him."

To her surprise, instead of dispelling his doubts, the chief ritualist sucked in a sharp breath and frowned. "That can't be right. A few years ago, when I went to the Tianji Institute to report, remember? The state preceptor was playing chess in the pavilion. I stood nearby and, for some reason I can't recall now, took a good look at his hands." He paused. "Wait, I remember. You'd been talking about palmistry and bone-reading, so I secretly studied his fingers. I'm certain he didn't have a single mole."

The chief diviner frowned. "Maybe you missed the ring finger? The mole is very small and easy to overlook."

“Impossible.” The chief ritualist shook his head. “I examined every finger, both hands, without missing a single one. How could I analyze bone structure otherwise? I was bold enough to look, and my heart was pounding afterward, so there’s no way I misremembered. What about you? Are you sure? It was so long ago, maybe your memory is a bit fuzzy.”

“I’m absolutely certain.” The chief diviner gripped her mask tighter. “Besides, if I were mistaken, how could I have seen the same mole on the state preceptor’s hand at Mount Boji?”

Such a precise coincidence was too unlikely. The two stared at each other, brows furrowed, expressions grave. Had the moonlight been brighter, it would have revealed the deep-seated alarm in their eyes. They seemed to have stumbled upon a shocking truth: The state preceptor they’d both seen had conflicting features. The chance of one of them being wrong had also been eliminated, so only one conclusion remained—

There wasn’t one state preceptor, but two.

For a moment, they forgot to breathe, their voices lost.

A good while later, the chief ritualist finally spoke, his voice straining like someone had their hands around his throat: “Could it… Could there be the slightest chance that the state preceptor has been replaced by an imposter?”

He swallowed nervously as he spoke, for the mere thought of this was terrifying.

“Do you really think so? This is the state preceptor we’re talking about…” To the chief diviner, the state preceptor had always occupied a divine, untouchable position. She rejected the idea right away. “How could anyone impersonate him? And who would dare?”

The chief ritualist held his breath, thinking it over, then exhaled heavily. “You’re right. The state preceptor couldn’t possibly be impersonated. Neither the Court of Imperial Sacrifices nor Tianji Institute are places that just anyone can infiltrate. If it were an insider…”

“Even less likely. You and I are among the most senior in the Court of Imperial Sacrifices. Would you dare impersonate the state preceptor?” the chief diviner retorted.

The chief ritualist waved his hands frantically, as if fending off a blade. “No, no, no, no! I wouldn’t dare even if I had eight times the guts!”

“Exactly.” The chief diviner frowned. “The possibility of an imposter is almost negligible.”

The chief ritualist’s expression shifted to stunned as he realized the implication. “You mean…the state preceptor allowed it? Or even…”

Orchestrated it himself.

Why would the state preceptor do such a thing? That they couldn’t fathom.

The state preceptor never explained his actions. In fact, he rarely spoke at all. In the over ten years the chief diviner and chief ritualist had been at the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, they could count on one hand the number of times they’d heard him speak. Apart from his occasional surprise inspections of the temple and the annual pilgrimage to Mount Tai for the celestial rites, the state preceptor seldom left the Tianji Institute. He was like a reclusive sage, albeit one who lived within the imperial court. When he had orders, he usually sent them directly via letters.

The Court of Imperial Sacrifices answered directly to him. Typically, if there were matters requiring their involvement—whether from the common folk or the court—the state preceptor would issue commands. But as far as the chief diviner and chief ritualist knew, the state preceptor’s reach extended beyond just the Court of Imperial Sacrifices. Sometimes, when they went to report to him, they would see him burning letters, yet no one in the temple would receive any orders afterward. Clearly the state preceptor had covert operatives besides his known personnel.

But this was none of their concern. Aside from members of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, there were gifted individuals who preferred to remain in the shadows, unaffiliated with the court. The state preceptor’s behavior seemed normal to the chief ritualist and the chief diviner. And it wasn’t something they were in any position to question, anyway. The entire Court of Imperial Sacrifices, and indeed most of the court—including the emperor himself—knew the state preceptor was eccentric, unpredictable, and inscrutable. Geniuses often had quirks, and given that the state preceptor had outlasted multiple reigns, even the emperor treated him with deference. His abilities were unmatched, so who would dare question him?

Moreover, though the state preceptor was capricious, he wasn't domineering. He rarely involved himself in matters unrelated to him. Thus, even when his orders were perplexing, others in the court would comply without asking why.

"Ah!" The chief ritualist suddenly gasped. "Do you recall the arrest warrants the state preceptor ordered the local authorities to distribute?"

"Yes. The notices bore the likeness of a monk somewhat resembling the state preceptor. I was puzzled when I saw them and asked for more information," the chief diviner said. "The Vice Minister said he didn't know the state preceptor's purpose, but he'd heard that many years ago, before he joined the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, similar warrants had been issued. At the time, there were rumors that the state preceptor was…" She paused, lowering her voice. "…about to pass away. The public had their own theories about the warrants, which muddied the rumors.

"In truth, the state preceptor had been in poor health and wasn't at the Tianji Institute. He reportedly disappeared for over a month but then reappeared in his usual state. I assumed this was a similar situation, given his seclusion. The junior minister told me not to pry, and the state preceptor later explicitly forbade the Court of Imperial Sacrifices from getting involved, so I dropped it."

The chief ritualist pondered this.

"What if—just what if—one of the two we've seen left the court?" he whispered. "And the other disapproved, hence…"

"Hence the warrants to track him down?" the chief diviner finished. "But—"

"If it were just to obscure rumors or some simple reason, why bypass the Court of Imperial Sacrifices?" he interrupted, feeling they were on to something. "He had the local authorities issue the warrants but explicitly barred us from involvement. Why? We've never dared disobey him—it's second nature by now. But think about it. Arrest warrants aren't outside our purview. If it were the state preceptor's order, we could've handled it. Unless he didn't want us to encounter something, or someone, through the warrants."

"You mean…"

“If he’s searching for the other state preceptor, outsiders who’ve never met him would treat it as a routine warrant and report the sightings through normal means. But if *we* saw him…”

The scene at Mount Boji was proof enough of what would happen.

They fell silent, staring blankly at the distant glimmer of the river temple. If most of their speculations were true, then the state preceptor they were following was the one who had left the court, while the one at Famen Temple had bypassed the Court of Imperial Sacrifices to have the local authorities search for the fugitive.

“Yuebai, what should we do…?” the chief ritualist suddenly asked.

The name “Yuebai” gave the chief diviner pause. When they’d first been brought to the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, they had all been around seven or eight years old, some even younger, and mostly from impoverished families. Common folk gave their children crude nicknames, believing it would help them survive: names with meanings like “Cat,” “Dog,” “Six Taels,” or “Seven Pounds,” nothing decent. Thus, upon entering the temple, each was given a more elegant name based on a color. The chief diviner had been called Yuebai—*moon white*; the chief ritualist, Yuanqing—*original blue*. But it had been years since anyone had used those names. Hearing it now, the chief diviner knew the chief ritualist was truly at a loss.

“Let’s keep following,” the chief diviner said, recalling the sharp jawline and soothing voice of the state preceptor she had met all those years ago. “We can’t spend our lives obeying orders blindly. I want to know if the one I’m following is the one I chose to follow…”

The chief ritualist was silent for a moment, then nodded. He sighed, glanced at the younger temple members behind them, and brushed the dust from his robes. “Then let’s follow. At least we have some skills. We won’t lose them too—”

Before he could finish, the chief ritualist halted. A clear, resonant cry rang out from the direction of the river temple, as refreshing as a spring breeze, as bright as the moon, and as soul stirring as a divine revelation.

A long shadow soared into the sky from the temple, piercing the clouds. Then, a gust of wind arose. The crescent moon still hung in the sky,

but thunder rumbled. The long shadow twisted and turned high above until it vanished without a trace.

That had been—

"A dragon…!"

The chief diviner, the chief ritualist, and the hundred members from the Court of Imperial Sacrifices stood dumbfounded on the mountaintop, craning their necks like a flock of startled quails.

Witnessing a living dragon whisk past would leave anyone speechless. The chief ritualist's mind blanked. After a long pause, he looked toward the river temple. The faint light there had been extinguished. Clearly, the place was now empty.

The group remained dumbfounded until a realization struck them. Sounding like his soul had just left his body, the chief ritualist mumbled, "D-did the state preceptor just ride a dragon into the heavens?"

"Seems so," replied the chief diviner, equally shell-shocked.

The chief ritualist was left speechless.

And how the hell are we supposed to follow that?!

Chapter 32:
Shop of Walking Corpses

TWO OTHERS WERE JUST AS DEVASTATED as the people from the Court of Imperial Sacrifices: Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi, who were each dangling from a dragon's claw.

Shitou Zhang hadn't just been carving random stones at the Fang residence—he'd actually done some practical work. He figured that the Fang family's herb gatherers, who often traveled out, would be familiar with the surrounding mountains. While Xue Xian and Xuanmin were away, he had asked them for information.

He remembered the landscape around the mountain where he'd been blindfolded and taken, so he'd described it in detail to the herb gatherers. Fortunately, they actually had some guesses. There were two places where one could see the river as he had described, Mount Yunxi and Mount Lianjiang.

These two mountains were located between Anqing Prefecture and Wuchang Prefecture, not too far from Qingping County where they'd been staying…at least by Xue Xian's definition of "not too far." Since Shitou Zhang had managed to dig up a piece of dragon bone there by chance, Xue Xian figured there might be some other fragments left behind. Since they were already heading to Langzhou, which was in the same direction, it wouldn't hurt to stop by those two mountains and take a look.

Xue Xian was the type to act before speaking, and he gave Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi no time to prepare after he'd made his decision. He simply grabbed one in each paw and soared into the sky. Such a bold move was something only Xuanmin could handle—anyone else would have been half dead from fright.

The four of them soon landed on Mount Yunxi.

The moment Shitou Zhang's feet touched the ground, his world spun around him. He collapsed onto the ground, muttering and slurring as he

patted his robe. “Th-thank goodness… Thank goodness I d-didn’t wet myself.”

Xue Xian shot him a disgusted glance and scanned the mountainside.

Shitou Zhang lay sprawled on the ground for a long time before he staggered to his feet. As he tried to steady himself, he cast an envious and jealous look at Xuanmin, who was standing absolutely still.

“Um, can we make a deal, Wise One?” Shitou Zhang asked Xue Xian. “Next time, can I ride on your back instead of dangling from your claws? It was so bumpy… I think I’m going to throw up…”

“Do you think just *anyone* could ride a dragon’s back?” Xue Xian said with a glare.

Xuanmin, who’d started brushing aside branches while holding a paper talisman to detect any unusual spiritual energy in the area, paused at these words.

Xue Xian noticed something had been off about his phrasing. When he looked up, he caught Xuanmin’s gaze. Xue Xian spun on his heel, turned his back to Xuanmin, and snapped at Shitou Zhang, “Piss off!”

Shitou Zhang blinked. Negotiations had failed, so he had no choice but to obediently get to work. He picked a few spots, stood on a high rock, and scanned the surroundings in all directions before shaking his head. “It’s not this mountain. We’ll have to go—”

Before he could finish his sentence, he and Lu Nianqi were once again grabbed by the mighty Xue Xian. Without any time to make a face of despair, Shitou Zhang found himself soaring through the sky in the howling wind again.

O ancestors above, save me!

Next time, the landing was even more dramatic. The moment Xue Xian’s feet touched the ground of Mount Lianjiang, the entire mountain trembled twice. That familiar sense of resonance returned.

“This is the place!” Xue Xian sounded absolutely certain. The more he recovered, the stronger his connection with his bones in the mountains became.

This tremor was far more violent than any so far. Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi—already dizzy from flying—stumbled and fell. The earthquake got so bad that Shitou Zhang started to roll downhill. Fortunately, Xuanmin reached out and grabbed him before he could go far.

“Just sit,” he said bluntly to the two of them.

With the mountain shaking like this, it was a miracle it hadn’t collapsed. Staying upright was out of the question.

Shitou Zhang pulled the near-blind Lu Nianqi over, and the two of them collapsed by an old tree at the summit. They desperately clung to its trunk to avoid being tossed off the mountain.

Xue Xian only needed to flex his fingers a fraction to sense that something was wrong with the dragon bones. It felt as though some force underground was suppressing them, making them difficult to extract. It was like reaching for an object that should have been easy to grasp, only to find it cumbersome, as if something was weighing it down. If the resistance when retrieving the bone in Wen Village had felt like the force of a thousand pounds, this time it was like two Mount Tais were pressed on top.

Xue Xian frowned, then sensed someone approaching and turned. As expected, it was Xuanmin.

Perhaps this was just not Xue Xian’s year. Ever since he’d had his tendons and bones ripped out, nothing had gone smoothly.

There were very few people in the world capable of helping him, and he had long grown accustomed to figuring things out on his own. He preferred action over words, force over diplomacy. After all, he feared nothing. But after meeting Xuanmin, he’d realized that having someone lend a hand at critical moments could save him a lot of trouble. He had thought that, given his dislike of others interfering and his reluctance to owe favors, he wouldn’t appreciate being helped.

In reality, when Xuanmin repeatedly stepped in, Xue Xian found it… not that bad. Maybe it was because Xuanmin’s timing was always impeccable, or maybe Xue Xian’s temper had mellowed a bit after he became a paraplegic. Whatever the case, he’d actually grown accustomed to Xuanmin’s involvement, to the point where he left a space for him.

Like right now. When Xuanmin drew out his copper coins and helped to clear away all other obstacles, that empty space was filled.

This was the first time Xue Xian had been distracted while retrieving his bones.

The shuddering mountain was like a ferocious beast struggling to break free, only to be coldly and forcefully pinned down by Xuanmin. Yet, as the bones were about to emerge from the soil, they halted for a second.

Xuanmin's low voice sounded in Xue Xian's ear: "Don't let up." He grasped Xue Xian's hand, and a surge of warm spiritual energy poured into his palm through the thin layer of skin. The bones buried in the mountain stirred.

Xue Xian's fingers twitched in Xuanmin's grip before he snapped back to attention and increased his strength. With a burst of wind and quakes so violent that even the old trees nearby nearly toppled, several pieces of pale bones broke free from the soil and shot toward Xue Xian. One after another, they turned to powder upon touching his outstretched hand and merged into his body.

Before Xue Xian could begin to process his restored bones, something extraordinary happened on Mount Lianjiang. Four threadlike strands resembling spider silk shot from the mountain at incredible speed, each heading in a different direction—three to the east and one alone to the west. The traces vanished in the blink of an eye, evaporating into the night like mist, leaving no further movement.

Xue Xian frowned and scanned the area but couldn't immediately discern what those fleeting "threads" had been.

"Did you get them? Is it finally done shaking? Can I let go now?" Shitou Zhang asked in rapid succession. His face was full of relief after his narrow brush with death, but he didn't let go of the tree he was clinging to. "Why are you two just standing there, looking all alert?"

Xue Xian's bones had indeed been retrieved, yet his hand remained at his side, clasped to Xuanmin's. Worse, Xue Xian had somehow hooked one of Xuanmin's fingers through his without noticing.

How did we end up in this position? Xue Xian wondered. *I can't remember at all…*

The feeling of their palms and the undersides of their arms pressed together carried an indescribable intimacy. Whether it was a temporary lapse of reason or something else, Xue Xian found this closeness somewhat enchanting, and he was reluctant to move away. He glanced down surreptitiously and studied the sight for a moment. Only then did he withdraw his hand.

Xuanmin hadn’t moved earlier—perhaps he’d been too surprised and hadn’t returned to his senses. It wasn’t until Xue Xian pulled away that he looked over.

When Xuanmin observed someone, his gaze was always light and fleeting—a brief touch or a sweep, rarely lingering. Though his eyes usually appeared calm and indifferent, there seemed to be a transient moment, almost impossible to catch, when they darkened into something unfathomable.

The atmosphere between them turned oddly tense, but Shitou Zhang remained oblivious. He used the tree’s trunk to haul himself to his feet as he adjusted to the now-stable mountaintop. After pressing his weathered face against the tree bark for a moment, he sighed and began slapping the dirt off his clothes.

Lu Nianqi was still sitting cross-legged on the ground.

“What’s wrong?” Shitou Zhang asked with a nudge. “Don’t tell me there’s a problem?”

Lu Nianqi rolled his eyes. “How would I know? I’m blind.”

Shitou Zhang thought the kid’s tone was a bit off. Xue Xian, who had just stepped over, also noticed. He saw the teenager’s eyes flicker over his fingers before fixing blankly on empty space, like he couldn’t see a single thing.

You…

Xue Xian coughed and steered the conversation back on track as he scanned the surroundings from the mountaintop. “What was that just now?” He pointed in three directions. “Those things shot off toward these places, right? One went diagonally into the river and disappeared, another went straight across the river, and the third—”

When he reached this point, he gave a tight frown, and an idea flashed through his mind.

“Huizhou Prefecture, the river’s center, Anqing Prefecture,” Xuanmin said, as if reading Xue Xian’s thoughts. He pointed toward the three spots and stated their names firmly. To Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi, who had

joined the journey midway, not all of these places held significance. But to Xue Xian and Xuanmin, it was a major connection.

“The Liu family estate, Fentou Island, Wen Village,” Xue Xian elaborated. He exchanged a glance with Xuanmin.

At the Liu estate in Ningyang County, Huizhou Prefecture, Xue Xian had dug up his true form encased in the golden marble. At the river’s heart in the underground tomb on Fentou Island, he had retrieved his first bone. The second bone had been excavated in Wen Village, Anqing Prefecture. Now, Mount Lianjiang made the third. Along the way, they had also encountered Shitou Zhang and reclaimed the dragon-bone sword he had carved, but since the bone had been picked up from Mount Lianjiang, it counted as part of this location.

The silklike threads had shot out from Mount Lianjiang. The three strands heading east had pointed to where Xue Xian’s golden marble and stolen bones had once been buried. As for the one to the west… If they weren’t mistaken, it indicated the final destination.

“I also saw the silver threads just now. They were very clear,” Lu Nianqi said.

This statement carried a clear meaning. Due to Lu Shijiu’s influence, Lu Nianqi’s eyes could not register ordinary things, but they were sharp when it came to spirits, energy, or spiritual phenomena. If he saw those spider-silk threads clearly, it meant they were one of those three things.

After a moment of contemplation, Xuanmin offered a guess: “A large-scale array.”

“An array?” Xue Xian asked with a start.

It took him a second, but then he understood. The golden marble and some of his bones had been entangled in arrays, like Drawing the River to the Sea at the Liu residence or the Flow of a Hundred Soldiers at Fentou Island. These situations had pulled their attention, and they’d overlooked a possibility—what if these arrays were just surface-level? What if the burial sites of the golden marble and each piece of Xue Xian were connected to form a much larger and grander array?

Xuanmin’s memories were incomplete, so he couldn’t immediately identify what kind of grand array this might have been.

“Some enormous arrays require an awakening array,” he ventured after some consideration.

Xue Xian frowned. “Awakening array?”

“You need to choose appropriate locations, embed spiritual artifacts as the anchor, and use the power of the four cardinal directions to complete the true array. Then it can be awakened,” Xuanmin explained. “Once the true array is completed, the involved spiritual artifacts become irrelevant.”

It was like propping up a trellis in a courtyard to guide vines upward. Once the vines had climbed high enough and stabilized, the trellis could be removed or left in place. The vines might shift, but they wouldn’t fall.

Hearing this, Xue Xian recalled several puzzling points. The sorcerer who’d set up Drawing the River to the Sea for Scribe Liu had seemed knowledgeable, but then why had he contained a golden marble—the transformed body of a dragon, no less—under such a minor array, all for the sake of a petty official like Scribe Liu? The same went for when someone like Shitou Zhang had been able to dig up a dragon bone on Mount Lianjiang.

Back in Wen Village, Xue Xian had wondered why the array linked to the dragon bone had been so crude, barely enough to deter rogue sorcerers. That level of array was practically an open invitation to Xue Xian. If Xuanmin’s guess was correct, these oddities could be explained, and the increasing tremors when retrieving bones made sense. In the early stages, extracting one or two pieces would have had little impact. As more were removed, it was like dismantling the final supports—there had to be *some* shift.

“That means…” Xue Xian’s expression grew serious. “The large-scale array has already been completed.” That was why removing the spiritual artifacts used in the awakening array had become so difficult.

Judging by the directions the threads had shot toward, there was still something to the west. It was unclear whether it was part of the awakening array or the true array.

Xue Xian was decisive by nature. Since a direction had been indicated, there was no reason not to investigate. He was about to grab his companions and take to the skies, but Xuanmin interrupted.

Xuanmin placed the copper coins back in Xue Xian's hand. "To avoid unnecessary complications, you should refine the dragon bones you just retrieved here."

To be precise: to avoid burning up and becoming disoriented mid-journey, which could lead to unnecessary trouble.

Xue Xian thought this made sense, but as he took the coins, his feelings were complicated. As he'd used them a few times, his connection to the coins—or rather, his connection to Xuanmin through the coins—had grown increasingly obvious. If this continued, who knew how entangled they would become?

That reminded Xue Xian of something. "These coins of yours and the spiritual energy you channeled into my palm earlier—it's so potent it's practically beyond human ability. Did you take some miracle medicine?"

Xuanmin had helped before, but the power he'd displayed hadn't been enough to astonish Xue Xian, perhaps due to the coins' unbroken seals or Xuanmin's incomplete memories. At most, Xue Xian would have said that Xuanmin was exceptional among mortals.

Xuanmin had also steadied the land when Xue Xian retrieved the bone in Wen Village. However, his attention had been entirely focused on Xuanmin's hand, which had split open from the strain, leaving no room for further thought about the monk's spiritual power.

This time, despite the bones in Mount Lianjiang being the hardest to extract yet, and the resulting tremors being that much more violent, Xuanmin had not only stabilized the land but also lent Xue Xian additional strength.

Based on the aftermath in Wen Village, Xuanmin should have at least suffered a split in his hand, if not outright lost it. Somehow, he'd emerged completely unscathed. The contrast between incidents was downright bizarre, and his power was even more astonishing if it *was* related to his coins' seals. If he was this formidable with only three of the five seals broken, the results would be unimaginable when all five were undone. There were very few people in the world who could come to Xue Xian's aid, and even fewer who could have done it to the extent Xuanmin had.

But Xue Xian didn’t dwell on it. He’d only asked because he was curious.

Xuanmin frowned. “To be honest, I have many questions about this as well, but my existing memories don’t provide an explanation.” He met Xue Xian’s eyes and lingered there—a rare occurrence. “If I remember the reason, I will tell you.”

The answer was both expected and unexpected. From their previous conversations, Xue Xian knew Xuanmin wasn’t the type to deliberately evade topics or conceal things. Regardless of how he treated others, he was transparent with Xue Xian. So when Xue Xian asked the question, he’d already anticipated this answer.

What surprised him was Xuanmin’s tone and the look in his eyes. There was an unusual gravity to them. Xue Xian was stunned by Xuanmin’s eyes. It was like Xue Xian’s usual carefree self couldn’t bear the weight of them. He forgot how to respond for a second.

After a pause, he looked away and waved a hand with feigned nonchalance. “It’s fine, no need to be so serious. I was just asking.”

Without further thought, he grabbed the coins and hurried up a tree, where he could lean against the trunk and refine his newly retrieved dragon bones.

His meditation lasted the entire night.

Mere mortals like Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi couldn’t compete with Xue Xian and Xuanmin’s extraordinary constitutions. After flying around all night and enduring the mountain’s quakes, they were exhausted. They napped while Xue Xian refined his bones.

This time, Xue Xian had absorbed three bone fragments at once. He could feel the broken ends of his bones extending significantly, while the substitute bone threads shortened but grew tougher. They should last longer than before.

When Xue Xian emerged from his meditation, the first thing he heard was the distant, melodious chirping of mountain birds, crisp and refreshing. However, as the last notes faded, another familiar sigh reached his ears.

Xue Xian raised an eyebrow and opened his eyes to see Xuanmin's black bird circling him in the tree branches, a small cloth bundle clutched in its beak.

The bird's upbringing was a mystery, but it was wild by nature. It had chased after them earlier, from the hollow in Mount Boji to the village on the sunny side. Xue Xian had thought it would cling to Xuanmin, but just before entering the Fang residence, it'd flown off. Clearly, it disliked the idea of being confined in a small courtyard. When they set off, Xue Xian had scanned the Fang residence but hadn't seen it, so he'd assumed it was gone for good. Not the case, it seemed.

"You actually know the way," Xue Xian muttered, grabbing the bird and plucking the bundle from its beak. As he untied the knot, he glanced down at the base of the tree, where Xuanmin was meditating cross-legged.

Hearing the noise above, Xuanmin looked up. In the faint light of dawn, Xue Xian grinned at him and jerked his chin upward. "Morning. Your demonic ghost bird went thieving and brought you some pastries. Catch!"

With that, he loosely retied the bundle and let it drop. Xuanmin tilted his head a little but caught it neatly.

"Come down," Xuanmin said, unwrapping the bundle with a frown.

Xue Xian prepared to leap down from the tree, but the aggrieved black bird beat him to the ground. It landed obediently at Xuanmin's feet with a chastised air.

Xue Xian awkwardly retracted his foot, rolled his eyes, and leaned back against the tree. He bent one knee and swung the other leg back and forth lazily.

Over the lower eastern hills, he could see the first light of dawn on the horizon. As he glanced down at Xuanmin meditating under the tree with the now-docile black bird, he suddenly thought, *Living like this wouldn't be so bad.* Not too noisy, not too lonely. Every empty space was filled just right. If every dawn were like this, he wouldn't tire of it even after a hundred years…

The crisp morning air filled his chest, and Xue Xian felt a languid contentment.

“They weren’t stolen,” Xuanmin called from below, calm and measured. “The Fang family must have seen the letter we left. These pastries were prepared as provisions.”

As he spoke, he stood up, his monk robes still spotless. He unfolded the letter tucked in the bundle and showed it to Xue Xian, then lifted the pastries. “Hungry?”

Xue Xian swung his leg in a small curve. “I wouldn’t tempt me if I were you. Once my appetite gets going, even eating you along with those pastries won’t fill me up.”

Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian’s dangling leg, looking faintly exasperated, then turned and placed the bundle of pastries before the newly awakened Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi. “A kind gesture. Don’t waste it.” With that, he returned to the tree and tapped Xue Xian’s swinging calf. “What do you want to eat? We’ll buy something in the next town.”

In the morning light, Xuanmin’s dark eyes seemed to glow faintly. They were lighter than usual and strangely clear and gentle, like frost about to melt.

That contentment from earlier grew even stronger, almost to the point of bursting out of Xue Xian’s chest. He had the impulse to half jokingly ask Xuanmin, *Once you regain your memories, if there’s nothing urgent, why not stay with me?*

Just as he opened his mouth to speak, a faint sound interrupted him.

Snap!

Like a branch accidentally being stepped on.

In the blink of an eye, Xue Xian was no longer lounging on the tree. With a few nimble leaps, he covered a mile in pursuit of the sound. Then, like a dragonfly skimming water, he barely touched the treetops before returning. Another blink, and he was back before Xuanmin. He loosened his fingers, letting a wooden pendant dangle from them.

“Familiar?”

Xuanmin’s brow furrowed as he pulled out an identical wooden pendant from his robe. “Exactly the same.”

The pendant Xuanmin held had been taken in the underground stone chamber of the bamboo house from the man who'd set up the Flow of a Hundred Soldiers array. According to that man, it was a peachwood pendant given to him by the sorcerer Songyun, a mark of their sect.

Xue Xian coldly jerked his chin toward the depths of the forest. "When I was chasing that sound, I caught a glimpse of someone just as they vanished. They probably used an array to escape underground. I tried to seize them from afar but only caught this."

Still, it was enough to prove the person's origins. Xue Xian had thought it might be someone gathering firewood or herbs in the mountains at dawn, but this showed the visitor had ill intentions. Anyone carrying this pendant was connected to the sorcerer Songyun and had come here because of the dragon bones. Xue Xian suspected that last night's threads had alerted them, prompting this scouting mission.

Xue Xian took the pendant from Xuanmin's hand and crouched beside Lu Nianqi. "Do me a favor. Divine where the person who touched this pendant is now."

Though Lu Nianqi could seem indifferent, he was ready for action in critical moments. Without a word, he set down his pastry, took out his bundle of sticks, and began drawing on the ground. After a moment, he pointed west.

"Straight ahead, there's a mountain. Its summit looks like a horse's head. One side has five clustered stone peaks. The other side has a six-story temple pagoda."

"Got it. Hold on to those pastries. Eat too many and you might vomit."

With that, Xue Xian gestured to Xuanmin, grabbed Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi, then transformed into a dragon. Riding the morning clouds, he headed west.

Though Lu Nianqi couldn't name the location, his description was specific enough that Xue Xian easily spotted the horse-head mountain along the way. He landed in a secluded area hidden by the clouds.

Without hesitation, Lu Nianqi drew on the ground again. "He's still on the mountain and hasn't left. Around the mountainside… Huh, that's

strange.”

“What?”

“He just vanished.” Lu Nianqi sounded puzzled.

“Vanished?” Xue Xian scowled. “Dug his way to somewhere else?”

“Not like that.” Lu Nianqi shook his head. “When I say vanished, I don’t mean he left the mountainside for another location. He just… disappeared from the divination.”

Even as he said this, he seemed to find it hard to believe. He wiped the ground clean and tried again, only to shake his head once more. “Still the same. Can’t find him.”

Xue Xian sneered at the upward curve of the mountainside. “Fine, then we won’t rely on divination. I’ll unearth him myself.”

His instincts told him this situation was dangerous, so he decisively pricked his finger and smeared a drop of blood on the backs of Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi’s hands, carefully choosing unbroken skin (to avoid dragon-related complications). Once done, he pointed toward a mountain path in the distance.

“Take that path. There’s a tea stall leading to the county town. Wait there or go straight into the city. With dragon blood protecting you, you shouldn’t run into trouble. I’ll find you later. The bald donkey and I will investigate the mountain.”

Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi knew their limits and didn’t want to become burdens. Without argument, they both nodded, told Xue Xian and Xuanmin to be careful, and headed down the path toward the county gate.

Xue Xian and Xuanmin exchanged a glance and swiftly made their way up the mountainside.

After scanning the area, they spotted a concealed stone staircase deep in the woods, which led to a wide-open building built on a relatively flat area. It wasn’t a ruined temple or a resting pavilion. Xue Xian took a deep breath of the mountain breeze coming from that direction and grimaced in disgust.

“The stench of corpses.”

They climbed the stairs without hesitation and stood before the open door of the building. Xue Xian nearly staggered back from the overwhelming odor the moment he stopped. “This smell could knock out a whole village… What kind of cursed place is this?”

The building’s ceiling was unusually high, around five yards taller than the average house. There was a wooden threshold at the door, but it was carved with twisted, winding symbols and studded with nails along the edges. The entire threshold seemed to have been soaked or splashed with some kind of blood, leaving it dark and perpetually damp. It exuded a rusty, metallic stench that mingled nauseatingly with the pervasive odor of rot. The building had no large windows, only two narrow ventilation openings high up on the walls, like pinpricks. With so little light, the interior was dark and damp. Any living person would have been uncomfortable to stand near it, let alone try to peer inside.

Xue Xian frowned and waved a hand in front of his nose, but it was useless. Resigned, he held his breath and scanned the area. Hanging on either side of the door was a pair of inscribed plaques, but they were so weathered that parts were missing. After scrutinizing them, he finally made out eight words: *The dead walk here; the living keep away.*

That sounded familiar… Xue Xian turned to Xuanmin with a questioning look.

Given Xuanmin’s temperament, asking him to open his mouth in such an environment was worse than death. The moment Xue Xian silently posed his question, he felt his wrist being lifted. Xuanmin, expressionless, traced a few characters on his palm: *Corpse shop*.

A corpse shop? Xue Xian had heard of such places. In the region around the Xiang River, there were artisans who specialized in handling the dead; they escorted those who’d died far from home back for burial. They traveled only at night and avoided the living during the day. Since their journeys were long and couldn’t be completed in one night—especially in rain or snow—every few miles, there’d be stations for the artisans and corpses to rest and shelter from the rain. These were called corpse shops.

Xue Xian had little contact with such matters, so his knowledge was limited, but as far as he knew, corpse handlers had strict rules. Most only took bodies before decomposition set in. Otherwise, wouldn’t they have left

rotting flesh and maggots wherever they went? The stench alone would have been unbearable. So, for this corpse shop to reek so horribly was unusual.

Resigned, Xue Xian covered his nose and mouth, then steeled himself and stepped inside.

He glanced back at Xuanmin. Outwardly, Xuanmin looked composed, his only reaction a faint frown that betrayed his disgust for the smell and filth, but Xue Xian could read a trace of indescribable resignation in his dark, still eyes.

Xue Xian almost laughed. It wasn't funny in itself, but the juxtaposition with Xuanmin was so stark, it became amusing. Before the smile could form, though, he was hit by a bolt of realization.

Xuanmin was always reserved, his emotions buried deep and impenetrable. Most people could stare at him for ages and not decipher his thoughts. Xue Xian often struggled to understand his moods too. Somehow, in this moment, he could sense Xuanmin's emotions—effortlessly, even, as if it were the most natural thing in the world…

It hit Xue Xian then. The copper coins!

It was because of the connection forged by those coins. Their bond had grown stronger with each use, to the point where even subtle emotions could pass between them.

Xue Xian's smile shifted uncertainly. Who knew if this connection was good or bad? If it deepened further, would he be able to tell if his happiness was his own or influenced by Xuanmin's emotions? If he was sad, would it double because of Xuanmin's feelings? Worst of all, if Xuanmin's reactions were reaching him, did that mean his own emotions and impulses were also reaching Xuanmin? Including that almost-spoken urge earlier?

That would mean they were far too involved with each other. Just thinking about it made Xue Xian feel like he should discard his dignity and flee.

He decided to tell Xuanmin about this change once they left. They should sever it if possible, to avoid unnecessary complications.

When he came out of his thoughts, Xuanmin was watching him, clearly puzzled by his awkward, odd half smile. Xue Xian waved him off and spoke without thinking. “What? Ignore me.”

After the words left his mouth, he rolled his eyes, feeling like his soul had left his body.

Xuanmin stared at him but did not reply.

Xue Xian turned his focus to the interior of the building, which was emptier than he’d expected. In fact, the entire building was nearly devoid of objects—no tables, chairs, or even stone stools to sit on. By the faint light from the ventilation holes, Xue Xian walked along the walls. Compared to the emptiness of the middle, they had more to offer. Nailed to them at intervals were palm-sized, semicircular iron hoops, fixed into the stone on both ends with a slight arch in the middle. These hoops were always paired, spaced about a person’s width apart, lining all four walls in a full circle.

Xue Xian studied them and noticed frayed hemp rope fibers on a few. That made their purpose clear—when corpse handlers rested here, they would lean the standing bodies against the walls and tie them to these hoops. Partly to prevent them from slumping to the floor, but also to keep them from reanimating.

Suddenly, his steps halted. One of the hoops had a smear of blood on it. Whether it was accidentally smeared on or splattered, it was unmistakably fresh.

Without looking away, Xue Xian tapped Xuanmin and pointed at the bloody hoop.

Xuanmin’s brow furrowed briefly before smoothing out. He gestured at the corner he’d been standing in.

Following Xuanmin’s finger, Xue Xian spotted a coiled hemp rope and some crumpled paper on the ground. He had initially dismissed them as leftover trash and walked past them without a second glance. But if Xuanmin pointed them out, it couldn’t have been that simple.

Xue Xian still couldn’t figure it out after pondering for a little while, so he dutifully held out his palm to Xuanmin.

Xuanmin paused, then wrote with one finger: *Translocation array.*

Compared to spoken words, writing on Xue Xian's palm was less comprehensible, and Xuanmin couldn't write anything too complicated, so he only traced three quick characters. There was no time to dwell on the array's real name.

But Xue Xian understood what Xuanmin meant. Just like the person who'd vanished from Mount Lianjiang, someone here had used an array to teleport right before they'd arrived. When they put it all together, it meant the person who'd escaped was almost certainly the one Xue Xian was chasing.

It was just…

Xuanmin wrote on Xue Xian's palm again: *More than one person.*

Xue Xian crouched beside the insignificant-looking rope and paper balls. The stench of corpses, accumulated over years, was even stronger near the ground, so he covered his nose and mouth.

Up close, he saw a circle drawn in blood on the ground, rope coiled at its edge. The paper balls—talismans soaked in dried blood—were set around it. Beyond that, Xue Xian spotted something else. Near the corner, by the crevice in the wall, lay a few slender needles stained with dark blood, almost camouflaged on the ground. They would have been invisible without careful inspection.

There were many uses for such needles, but in this foul environment, with the sudden disappearance Lu Nianqi had spoken of, only one came to mind. In risky situations, some sorcerers used corpse generals: reanimated corpses that appeared almost human but were controlled by the sorcerer as substitutes. At the critical moment, pulling out their needles turned them back into lifeless bodies—and the dead never appeared in Lu Nianqi's divination results.

If this was the case, the identity of the mastermind behind it was obvious.

Having come this far, they were only steps away from the culprit. Xue Xian wasn't about to give up. He grabbed Xuanmin's hand and wrote: *Can the array still be used?*

Give chase? Xuanmin wrote back.

Xue Xian nodded.

Array is broken but can be restored, Xuanmin concluded.

With that, he pricked his finger and let blood drip onto the paper balls in a specific order. When the last drop had landed, the rusty blood circle brightened as if reactivated.

Xuanmin motioned for Xue Xian to step into the circle. It was narrow and barely fit one person—so the previous group had probably left one by one. Xue Xian stood inside its bounds, about to go ahead, when he noticed Xuanmin's faint frown as he prepared to seal the array.

Given Xuanmin's fastidiousness, staying in this building a moment longer would have been torture. Without thinking, Xue Xian grabbed his arm and yanked him into the circle just as the array activated. The force of this action caught Xuanmin off-balance, and he crashed into Xue Xian.

A gust of wind erupted from the blood circle. With a resonant hum, their surroundings changed.

Chapter 33:
Baichong Cave

ONCE THEY WERE in their new location, Xue Xian experienced a twinge of regret for his earlier action—then Xuanmin slammed into him with immense force.

The two stumbled several steps, half embracing, half grabbing at each other. Xue Xian's back slammed into a jagged, rocky wall with a thud, and Xuanmin, carried by inertia, crashed heavily into him. Sharp points dug painfully into Xue Xian's shoulders and back, sending waves of pain radiating through him. He couldn't suppress a muffled groan from the unexpected impact.

However, the back of his head, which should have been the most vulnerable, didn't hit anything sharp. Instead, it pressed against something much softer that cushioned the force of the blow.

It took him a second to process that Xuanmin had reached out to shield him just before impact. What Xue Xian's head had fallen against was Xuanmin's hand.

Xue Xian stiffened, then abruptly straightened up and tugged Xuanmin's hand from against the wall and into view.

This might have been the first time Xue Xian understood what it meant to "be careful." He knew full well that Xuanmin was no ordinary person; his body wasn't made of paper, nor would it fall apart from a little force. Still, Xuanmin's hand was scraped raw in several places by the sharp rocks. Some cuts were deep, while others were just superficial scratches, but the sheer number of them made for a gruesome sight. Blood quickly welled up and dripped down his hand.

Xue Xian was no stranger to blood. He'd seen and endured wounds far worse than this. But the myriad of small injuries on Xuanmin's hand still made Xue Xian's heart prickle with discomfort. His memories of causing Xuanmin trouble for no reason when they'd first met seemed like a lifetime ago.

“It’s fine.” Like Xue Xian, Xuanmin wasn’t one to fuss over his own injuries. As he tried to withdraw his hand, he patted Xue Xian’s shoulder with the other. “Did you hurt any bones in your back?”

“I’m missing a good chunk of those bones—what’s there to hurt?” Xue Xian said, not thinking of his back at all. “Stop pulling your hand away.”

He pinched Xuanmin’s uninjured ring and little fingers, then tugged his hand closer for inspection. Xue Xian was about to lower his head when Xuanmin swiftly cupped the dragon’s forehead with his free hand to stop him.

“Don’t be reckless.” Xuanmin’s voice carried a hint of exasperation.

“Reckless?” Xue Xian blinked up at him, baffled. “Why are you stopping me?”

Xuanmin’s dark eyes held his gaze like he wanted to say something, but he settled into silence instead.

Xue Xian blinked again. “Oh, you thought I was going to…”
Lick your wounds the way I did last time?

Xuanmin neither confirmed nor denied it, but his eyes flickered. That was as good as an admission.

“Dream on!” Xue Xian was both embarrassed and annoyed, but the sight of Xuanmin’s bloodied hand deflated his flash of temper. “Honestly. I just wanted to check if there’s a way to make these scrapes heal faster. Who knows. A puff of dragon breath might do the trick. After all, every part of me is precious.”

Xue Xian saw nothing wrong with the statement, but Xuanmin’s expression twitched with something unreadable before smoothing over. He withdrew his hand and stopped meeting Xue Xian’s eyes.

“Just scratches—hardly worth calling injuries,” he said, then he nodded toward the path ahead. “We should focus on catching up.”

Xue Xian knew such minor injuries meant nothing to either of them, so he didn’t insist. Besides, aside from dragon saliva, he couldn’t think of any way to speed up Xuanmin’s healing. He let Xuanmin pull his hand away and followed him deeper into the passage.

They seemed to have landed in a cave deep within the mountains. A narrow stone passage extended from where they stood, its walls slanting inward until it sealed shut at the very top.

Xue Xian and Xuanmin walked single file, forced to duck their heads due to their height. Xue Xian noted the sharp rocks jutting from the passage walls.

“There’s bloodstains.”

The blood smelled like old iron, and its color was dark. It definitely wasn’t fresh blood from Xuanmin’s hand. Xue Xian guessed it was from whoever had teleported here earlier, scraping against the rocks while squeezing through. And it wasn’t just the walls that were stained—the uneven ground also seemed soaked in old blood. The sticky sensation underfoot was deeply unpleasant.

“Mm,” Xuanmin agreed from ahead. “The blood on the ground is thick. Many people must have passed through.”

“More than one” and “many” carried different implications. Xuanmin’s tone sounded grave, as if the blood-soaked path was beyond his expectations.

This wasn’t the work of one or two people—not even seven or eight. For this much blood to have accumulated, at least a hundred or more must have passed through here, dripping half-coagulated blood as they went.

The spot where they had arrived received some faint light from above, but the further they went, the darker it became. After they rounded a bend, the passage widened slightly, but the dim light was completely cut off, plunging them into utter darkness.

Fortunately, Xue Xian’s vision was far superior to an ordinary human’s, and he could make out vague outlines even in such darkness. He took a few steps forward, intending to switch places with Xuanmin, but then Xuanmin caught Xue Xian’s wrist with great accuracy.

So demanding. Does he have eyes on his hands?

Nonetheless, Xuanmin’s attention wasn’t *entirely* unpleasant. Despite Xue Xian’s exasperated expression, he slowed his pace so he could stay shoulder to shoulder with Xuanmin instead of pushing ahead.

The two walked side by side through the narrow passage until an abrupt step down appeared. As they descended, the oppressive walls fell away, opening into a wider space.

Yet Xue Xian's movements halted abruptly. He grabbed Xuanmin's arm, stopping him mid-step, and traced a character on his palm: *Wait.*

Xuanmin froze in place.

They both held their breaths, scanning their darkened surroundings.

Normally, moving silently wouldn't have been difficult for them, but the blood on the passage floor was so sticky that even their careful steps produced faint sounds. The passage was eerily quiet and amplified the slightest rustle of fabric. Those tiny sounds bounced back and forth in the dark stone tunnel, forming overlapping echoes that masked other subtle noises.

Until they stopped moving. Then, the faint, skittering sounds became unmistakable. It was a light, rapid tap, like a dragonfly skimming water—but incessant, one after another, on and on and *on*.

Whether due to the echoes or some other reason, the sound came not from one direction but all around. Overhead, to the sides, ahead.

The skittering grew clearer.

Xue Xian's expression shifted. "Do you still have fire starters? Light one."

Even in a whisper, his voice was jarringly loud, and his words bounced off the walls three times before they faded.

In the middle of that, the skittering sounds abruptly ceased—then erupted into a frenzy, accompanied by a buzzing vibration, like the rapid flapping of wings.

As Xuanmin pulled out a fire starter, something occurred to him. The moment he struck it alight, he hurled it forward.

Boom!

Countless wings beat at once, the sheer volume nauseating. Dark shadows surged from every direction to swarm the tiny flame. Some even

brushed past their cheeks, the wind from their wings carrying a damp, musty scent, along with something powdery.

Disgusted, Xue Xian snatched one of the passing shadows from the air. But the moment his fingers touched it, he clicked his tongue and flicked it away. Rubbing his fingertips, he felt an uncomfortably smooth residue, likely the powder from its wings.

Xue Xian scowled, but before he could speak, Xuanmin's cold voice cut in: "Moths."

Moths, indeed.

Though the flame was quickly smothered by thousands of fluttering bodies, its brief glow revealed the space's layout—

A wider cavern, its walls curved like an upturned melon. The arched walls were pocked with holes and crevices where myriad moths had hidden, lying in wait.

Even in dragon form, Xue Xian loathed such pests. Not just moths, but anything that would wriggle, creep, or throng in swarms. The thought of them brushing past his face darkened his expression.

The fire starter was engulfed by the writhing ball of moths. Then, with a sickening crackle, the smothered flame died, and the moths rained to the ground.

Simultaneously, more wingbeats erupted from the walls.

"What kind of cursed place *is* this, with this many pests?!" Xue Xian snapped.

"Step back." Xuanmin produced another fire starter—and his copper coins.

Fwoosh.

A tiny flame sprang to life at the tip, illuminating his slender fingers.

Boom!

There came another deafening spate of fluttering as a dark tide of moths surged toward them.

Xuanmin swept a finger over the copper coins, then tapped the surface. A metallic hum resonated, and a fierce wind erupted from his

sleeves. The tiny flame stretched and swelled into a fiery dragon that coiled through the cavern, incinerating the moths in its wake. The blazing dragon tangled around the swarm, and the cavern flickered between light and dark.

Watching the rain of moth corpses, Xue Xian grimaced and turned away. His gaze fixed upon on the cavern walls, where the moth-infested crevices weren’t natural but carved characters.

“There are carvings on the wall.” He tugged at Xuanmin, tracing the characters downward until his finger stopped at one cluster. “Baichong Cave…”

He sucked in a breath. Where had he heard that before?

Ah! Isn’t this the place where the Life-Sharing Spider was rumored to be?!

Chasing after someone had led them here. Somehow, they’d managed to fumble their way to their destination. It was too much of a coincidence.

For a moment, Xue Xian felt a tremor of unease, but before it could solidify, he dismissed it. The wall carvings might as well have been gibberish. Aside from “Baichong Cave,” Xue Xian recognized nothing. The script must have been the creation of some ancient tribe. After futilely attempting to decipher it, he gave up and looked elsewhere.

“This place is crawling with moths! Disgusting. Definitely not a place to linger.” Xue Xian swatted at the falling insect corpses, his face twisted in revulsion. “There’s another passage ahead. Let’s move. Anything’s better than these powder-covered vermin.”

Xuanmin’s gaze lingered on the carvings, but then he nodded. “Mm.”

Without delaying further, he brushed aside the incoming moths with his sleeve and led Xue Xian toward the next passage.

The fiery dragon wreaked havoc, charring every moth in its path. Xuanmin glanced backward. In no time at all, the ground had been carpeted with insect corpses—a nauseating sight. A closer look revealed something unusual.

“Ugh, these damn things bite.” Xue Xian smacked the two bloody marks on his hand irritably. If not for his natural aversion to fire, he would have burned the entire cavern to the ground. Instead, he just waved his wounded hand at Xuanmin, unaware that his gesture was a little like a pouting child’s.

Using the blazing dragon’s light, Xuanmin examined the wounds, then pointed at the moth corpses. “Some are abnormally large.”

If a mystical creature like the Life-Sharing Spider could be bred here, Baichong Cave was no ordinary place. It seemed to act as a natural crucible

for gu. As the moths lived here generation after generation, it was no surprise that they'd begun to mutate, and in horrifying ways. Not only had the mutations made the moths larger, they'd also given them a craving for flesh.

Xue Xian strode ahead without a backward glance, his face stormy. "Let's move. Take one more look at those things and I'll vomit on you."

The further they went, the taller the passage became, allowing them to straighten up. Xuanmin's fiery dragon soared overhead at his command, lighting the way. Even Xue Xian found the blaze tolerable now since it kept the moths away.

The two bloody wounds on Xue Xian's hand burned briefly before they faded. The moths must have been venomous. Anyone else who had stumbled into the cave would have been driven mad by disgust or have died in the cave covered in venomous bites. In any case, no kind fate would await them.

Though most of the moths in the cavern had been incinerated, the passage still harbored some. As Xuanmin had said, they were far larger than normal; some were even palm-sized. Their bloated abdomens suggested a diet of something substantial. Driven by instinct, most hurled themselves at the fiery dragon, but others were drawn to Xue Xian and Xuanmin.

"The further we go, the stranger these moths get," Xue Xian said with a scowl, sweeping his sleeve in annoyance. The resulting gale, sharp as knives, sliced into the attacking creatures and slammed them against the stone walls. The entire cave shook. Fine rock fragments showered down, creating a cloud of dust.

Sometimes, excessive power wasn't a blessing. In a place on the verge of collapse, brute force was useless. Annoyed, Xue Xian consoled himself: *At least the bald donkey is here.* He knows how to rein himself in.

By the time the two of them reached the passage's depths, the moths no longer mindlessly charged into the flames. Instead, they seemed almost intelligent. They avoided the pair of men and fled ahead as if they were trying to warn something else. Xue Xian couldn't shake the feeling that the moths' behavior carried an ominous implication.

Lost in thought, he felt a sudden itch on his left pinky, like something tiny was crawling over it. He frowned and lifted his hand.

“Ants.”

A reddish ant perched on his finger, its head and antennae twitching, but it was much larger than a typical ant. Its exoskeleton gleamed red in the firelight. The audacious thing opened its jaws right in front of Xue Xian and bit a piece of flesh from his little finger.

“Tch! Another bloodsucking, flesh-eating pest.” Xue Xian irritably flicked the ant away. Naturally, there was plenty of force behind his little gesture, and the ant splattered against the cavern wall. Its innards emitted a foul, rotting stench as they oozed over the stone.

The stench alone was enough to confirm its diet: It spent its days feeding on carcasses. Whether human or animal… That remained unclear.

Before Xue Xian could recover from the putrid stench, he felt someone patting him on his sides and back. Turning, he saw Xuanmin draw back his hand. At their feet lay several upturned ants, and columns more marched toward them from ahead, scaling the uneven ground and jagged walls.

The lines stretched from their feet to the edge of the firelight. These were far worse than the moths, for these would climb their legs. Xue Xian glanced at Xuanmin, whose expression had turned glacial. Xuanmin would never tolerate insects crawling under his clothes.

Xue Xian peered into the darkness beyond the firelight, and his face grew grim. Ahead of them, the scattered ants had practically formed a carpet.

The moment Xue Xian and Xuanmin paused, the lightning-fast ants rushed toward them in a rustling tide. It was if they’d been collectively alerted, and they were practically at the pair’s feet already.

Again, he thought of the moths. Everything in this cave seemed on the verge of intelligence.

They couldn’t tread upon the ground, brush against the stone walls, or touch the ant-covered ceiling overhead. Without a second thought, Xue Xian summoned a gale beneath their feet, disregarding the risk of collapse,

and yanked Xuanmin forward. Carried by the wind, they skimmed over the tide of man-eating ants.

The gale roared, shaking the cavern. Rocks rained from above as countless ants were crushed against the walls or torn apart in midair. Xuanmin's fiery dragon also continued its rampage, scorching the ceiling black.

Now Xue Xian understood Old Man Qu's words: *Just hearing the name "Baichong Cave" would be enough to scare the life out of them.* Had they been ordinary humans, they'd have entered whole and left as skeletons.

The cave seemed endless. After what felt like an hour of battling through with fire and wind, the ground was a graveyard.

"Moths, carnivorous ants, centipedes, millipedes, scorpions…" Xue Xian tallied the venomous pests they'd slain and sneered at the carnage.

Each had been deadlier than the last, larger and harder to kill—some had even required prolonged burning before they succumbed. Nonetheless, troublesome as they were, they were mere nuisances to Xue Xian and Xuanmin. The real reason for Xue Xian's sneering lay elsewhere.

The further in they ventured, the more the piles on the ground no longer consisted of only the insect carcasses he and Xuanmin had slaughtered. Mixed in with those mountains of insect remains were an ever-increasing number of human bones. The bare bones were a yellowish white, their skin and flesh having been devoured so thoroughly that not a scrap remained. At first, they looked as if they'd lain there for ages. However, a closer inspection revealed damp blood still adhering to the bones, along with a lingering, familiar smell.

They'd reached the end of the sea of insect corpses. Xue Xian covered his nose. "The ones from the corpse shop."

Xuanmin frowned, scanning the area before focusing ahead. They were at the passage's end. A solid wall stood in front of them and a spiraling stone staircase with narrow, cobweb-draped steps lay at their feet. The webs, once layered on thick, had been brushed aside and now hung at the sides.

The sight of webs brought the Life-Sharing Spider to mind. This couldn't have been coincidence—the stairs likely led to their destination.

“Someone beat us here.” Xue Xian eyed the webs. “The ones in the corpse shop were just meat shields.”

“But there aren’t enough bones here. Some must remain.”

“Probably there.” Xue Xian pointed upward.

They glanced at each other and set off to climb the stone staircase.

The staircase, too, was smeared with tacky blood, along with other filth and grime. Both of them hovered with their feet off the ground, which had the fortunate side effect of preventing any noises.

These stairs were long, twisting and winding, with what must have been over a hundred steps. Still, a few moments were all they needed to silently land at the top.

There, a flat stone chamber opened up, perhaps twice the size of a regular room. At the chamber’s center was a deep black pool. A bronze mirror rested beside it. Large, haphazard swaths of blood extended from the wall all the way to the stones lining the pool’s edge. One of the white stones bore five bloody streaks—as if someone had clawed desperately at it.

“There’s nobody here? They sure ran fast.” Xue Xian scanned the chamber by the firelight until his gaze settled on the white stone. “Or sank to the bottom.”

The chamber’s squared edges marked it as man-made. Aside from the pool and a few supporting pillars, a stone platform at the far end resembled a bed. A very hard, very cold bed. Hardly comfortable.

“Someone was cultivating here,” Xuanmin remarked as they entered, his eyes on the bed.

Xue Xian jerked a thumb backward. “What kind of nutjob would choose a place like this?”

Despite the lack of swarming pests here, the mountain of corpses below was not conducive to meditation. Yet signs of habitation were undeniable—there was the platform, and also alcoves carved into the walls at arm level. Xuanmin touched one, then wiped his fingers with a look of disgust before casting a cleansing charm.

“What?” Xue Xian eyed the alcoves and Xuanmin’s fingers.

“Lamp oil.”

Xue Xian initially assumed Xuanmin’s disgust was based on the greasiness, but then it hit him: Some lamp oils had inhumane origins. “Oh,” he said in understanding.

Despite Xuanmin’s revulsion, he cleaned the oil from his fingers, then swept the alcoves with the fiery dragon, lighting the wall-mounted lamps in a series of hisses before dismissing the flames. As the dragon vanished and he re-hooked the coins over his fingers, he glanced over at Xue Xian and the sweat beading his temples.

Relieved of the heat and pests, Xue Xian relaxed. He paced the chamber with his arms crossed.

“Aside from those finger-sized air holes, there’s no exit…” He stopped by the dark pool, nudging the bloodstained white stone. “So where’d the survivors go? Did they all drown themselves?”

The pool was barely thirty feet wide—hardly room for several bodies. And the bloody fingerprints suggested a struggle. Whether from infighting or another threat, if there had been a fight, there must have been victors and victims. The losers drowning was understandable, but what about the winners?

“And where’s the so-called Life-Sharing Spider?” Xue Xian muttered.

According to Old Man Qu, the legendary divine medicine was here. The cave lived up to its name, but they’d reached the end without seeing a single spider. During his pacing, Xue Xian had checked every crack and crevice—nothing.

“Perhaps this holds the answer.”

Xuanmin was by the stone bed, examining the dark cave wall. Like the moth-infested cavern earlier, this one bore inscriptions that covered the wall from top to bottom. Xue Xian had tried reading the ones in the other room, but all he’d gotten out of it was a headache. To him, it was a bunch of incomprehensible scribbles, without a single recognizable character. He had no idea how Xuanmin had the patience to stand there staring at them for so long.

Just looking at those characters made Xue Xian's head throb, so he stopped bothering with Xuanmin. Instead, Xue Xian squatted down by the black pool, wondering if he should just drain the entire thing. He studied it but found its depths unfathomable. From his vantage point, all he could see was a stretch of inky darkness. What might lie inside remained hidden.

What was he even going to do with the water? He glanced around. There was no chance he would suck it up again.

Doing it at Fentou Island was disgusting enough. This time I'll really fill the room with vomit.

His gaze fell on the bronze mirror lying near his feet. Judging from its bloodied rim, it must have been left behind by whoever had come here before. Or perhaps…they hadn't had the chance to take it. Xue Xian reached out, wanting to pick it up for a closer look. But when his fingers brushed its edge, he felt the mirror vibrate. Its metal edge clinked against the stone floor, and a faint gurgle emanated from the black pool as if someone had tossed a pebble in, disturbing its still surface.

Xuanmin turned at the sound, eyeing the mirror by Xue Xian's hand and the rippling black waters. Then, he walked over and joined Xue Xian in his crouch.

"There's something strange about this thing. Take a look." Xue Xian nudged it toward Xuanmin.

Xuanmin frowned and moved to pick up the mirror for a closer look. However, his fingers brushing against it caused another sound, much clearer than before. The mirror's response was much greater than it had been for Xue Xian. The ripples suddenly quickened, and the whole pool seemed to come to life. Circle after circle radiated outward with alarming speed.

Xuanmin instinctively tried to toss the mirror away, but it seemed stuck to his fingers, and he was unable to remove his hand. Moments later, taijitu symbols emerged from the mess of bloodstains surrounding the bronze mirror.

Xue Xian watched Xuanmin's fingers twitch upon the mirror, then his entire body seemed to freeze over. The only thing that moved were his eyes, which focused vacantly on the dark pool.

A droning sound buzzed in Xue Xian’s head. It was as if someone had cracked a whip across his mind, stunning him. For a long moment, he was trapped in a stupor.

When some of Xue Xian’s awareness returned and he could turn his head, he realized the black pool was no longer a void of darkness, but had become like a mirror itself. Upon its dark surface, a scene gradually emerged. This scene was dreamlike in its haziness, yet it made Xue Xian’s heart skip. He found himself drawn in, bewitched.

He seemed to be standing among mountains and rivers. Wind howled fiercely in his ears. Behind him, the mountains rumbled and shook, while towering waves charged toward the sky like a stampede of white horses. Countless terrified screams and wailing cries filled the air, shredded by the raging wind and crashing waves.

Beneath the sky-engulfing waves, amid the collapsing rocks, knelt two figures. Though everything was shrouded in a layer of mist, Xue Xian recognized them easily: Xuanmin and himself.

He saw himself motionless, hands limp at his sides, like a statue. His soaked black robes clung to him, while his wet hair stuck like a drowned man’s to his pallid neck. It was a gloomy scene.

Above that…his eyes were covered by a hand.

The hand had long, slender fingers. It should have been beautiful, but it was also too pale, almost a lifeless gray. It was Xuanmin’s hand.

Xuanmin raised his head, but his downcast eyes were hidden in shadow and veiled by a thin haze, rendering his emotions unreadable.

Their poses were deeply suggestive, as if they’d just kissed. However, Xue Xian failed to notice this through the water and mist.

Xuanmin burst into a long spate of heaving coughs. One of his hands remained on Xue Xian’s eyes, but the other hand dangled at his side as his coughs grew duller, more muffled. His once-pristine white monk robes were stained a deep red. Blood spread in dark pools across his chest and waist. There seemed no end to the blood, as it slowly soaked his entire robe. Xuanmin’s hand over Xue Xian’s eyes weakened and nearly slipped away.

The Xue Xian watching from a distance felt a chill course through him, and a cold sweat broke out all over his body. His lashes trembled before he jolted awake, tearing himself free of the misty vision.

Gradually, the buzzing in Xue Xian's ears subsided, and the sound of heavy, rapid breathing trickled into his ears.

As though he'd been roused from a nightmare, he realized the frantic breaths were his own.

His vision now clear, he saw the black pool rippling quietly. The scene on the surface had vanished without a trace. In front of him, Xuanmin was unharmed. His fingers were no longer a lifeless gray, nor were his robes drenched in blood. Instead, he sat with his profile turned toward Xue Xian, staring at the black pool.

He, too, seemed immersed in some kind of scene. Xue Xian couldn't tell whether he'd witnessed the same vision or something else, but a rare trace of emotion flickered in his expression. Most wouldn't have grasped what he was feeling, but they'd have found themselves filled with an inexplicable sorrow nonetheless as they watched him.

Xue Xian studied Xuanmin's face in silence, then frowned and pressed a hand to his own chest. He released a slow breath before he reached out and tentatively patted Xuanmin.

"Bald donkey?" Xue Xian's voice was hoarse.

Xuanmin didn't seem to hear him at all.

"Bald donkey, wake up."

Nothing.

Xue Xian frowned. His hand slid from Xuanmin's shoulder to the back of the other man's hand and closed around his fingers.

At this, Xuanmin's fingers finally released the mirror and left it on the ground. His hand gripped Xue Xian's in return. Was he seeking relief from pain? Wrestling with some unshakable emotion? Xuanmin clutched Xue Xian so fiercely that pain radiated through the bones of his fingers.

Xue Xian didn't pull back but lifted his eyes, just in time to see Xuanmin turn his face, his eyes still a little blank, his brow knitted. His

unfocused eyes swept over Xue Xian's face. He pressed his lips together and closed his eyes. After a long pause, he opened them once more, slowly.

"Awake now?" Xue Xian asked quietly.

Xuanmin's long stare was deep and inscrutable, whatever lurked there too tangled to read. Finally, he looked away and released Xue Xian's fingers.

"Mm," he murmured. With a sweep of his wide sleeve, the bronze mirror was sent skittering into a corner.

Xue Xian pulled back his hand. "That pool, just now, it…"

"The mirror and pool formed an array, but the blood masked it. We overlooked it." Xuanmin's voice was calm; it seemed he'd recovered.

"What array? Another inner demon?"

Xuanmin shook his head. "It shows your death," he said, sounding remarkably composed.

Xue Xian's breath hitched. "Death?"

"But the array shouldn't affect divine creatures like dragons…" Xuanmin said, his brow furrowed. "What did you see?"

Xue Xian's mind was a sea of blankness. Xuanmin's words confirmed that he'd seen an illusion. If the array had no effect on him, what he'd seen must have been a hallucination. Just a fragmented dream—or so he told himself.

Xuanmin was still frowning, waiting for an answer, so Xue Xian waved a hand. "I didn't see a thing. The pool just started rippling and you stopped responding, so I asked."

"Truly?" Xuanmin was quiet.

"Even lightning from the heavens can't kill me! How would I die?" Xue Xian scoffed.

Xuanmin looked into his eyes but found no openings there. He hummed and went silent, as if accepting Xue Xian's words. However, he added, "Be cautious in the future, regardless."

"What about you? What did you see?" Xue Xian asked, ignoring the warning.

Xuanmin got up, but he didn’t lift his eyes.

“Nothing. A peaceful death in old age.”

Chapter 34:
Mother and Child Spider

XUANMIN CASUALLY BRUSHED the dust from his sleeves. At first glance, nothing seemed amiss. But a subtle disquiet remained in Xue Xian's heart. Everything in the illusion had been veiled in mist, except for the vivid image of Xuanmin covered in blood. It was like a sharp thorn jabbing his flesh, impossible to ignore. The mere thought of the vision tugged on the spike and aggravated the surrounding flesh. He was deeply unsettled.

But he pushed the thought away. After all, he had a long lifespan. If Xuanmin found himself in trouble, Xue Xian could always lend a hand.

The idea that had surfaced in the morning light of Mount Lianjiang stirred restlessly in Xue Xian's mind once more, though this time it was more than a fleeting impulse. And if it wasn't just a whim, he needed to be deliberate telling Xuanmin. Now was not the place to bring it up, considering their blood-soaked surroundings and the unfinished business still at hand. Xue Xian would wait until they found the Life-Sharing Spider and left this horrible cave.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than he felt something shift near his feet, accompanied by a faint rustling sound. Had some surviving insect crawled up the stone steps? Xue Xian didn't see anything crawling there, and the faint sound ceased, as though aware that he was searching for its source.

Xue Xian peered down the steps with a displeased face until something occurred to him.

"With the way we burned things, we should have seen at least a few stragglers escape. There were thousands of insects below us, so how come none made it up here? Centipedes and millipedes might struggle to climb so many steps, but what about moths and winged ants? Why haven't any flown up?"

Xuanmin was studying the strange characters on the wall, focused as his eyes traced each symbol, like he actually understood them. Without

turning, he replied, “Perhaps they dare not come up.”

The guess aligned with Xue Xian’s own thoughts. The upper chamber wasn’t sealed off by a barrier or a door, yet it stood in stark contrast from the lower tunnel. One was a sea of insects, while the other was devoid of a single antenna. The only explanation was that the insects feared this place. Even without a physical barrier, they refused to cross the boundary.

Recalling the traces of spiderwebs on the steps, Xue Xian imagined what the insects were afraid of, and the source of the movement near his feet became clear.

Perhaps due to Xue Xian’s lack of movement, the creature at his feet grew bolder, throwing away its caution. The rustling it emitted would have been imperceptible to anyone without Xue Xian’s keen hearing. Resting his elbow on his knee, he listened for a few seconds, pinpointed the origin of the sound, then casually pressed a finger down.

He didn’t use much force. If this really was the thing they were looking for, his full strength could crush its carapace.

Beneath his fingertip was a small, round, bead-like object. It was smooth and fragile, as if the slightest pressure would shatter it. Xue Xian recalled the sound of rolling beads he’d heard after escaping the inner demon beneath the bamboo house. His eyes gleamed, and the corner of his lips twitched upward.

“I’ve caught something interesting.”

Xue Xian rarely encountered genuine threats in his life, so his vigilance was minimal compared to an ordinary mortal’s. Poisons didn’t affect him much, and few creatures could harm him, so he often acted without thinking. As the saying went, if you play with fire, you’ll get burned. No sooner had Xue Xian announced his catch than the creature beneath his fingers retaliated.

Xue Xian felt a sharp prick on his fingertip, followed by the distinct sensation of his blood being drawn. Simultaneously, the fragile bead began to swell, growing a full size larger with just one sip. Then, some kind of liquid was injected back into his flesh through the same puncture.

Had it not been a rare and fragile creature, Xue Xian would have killed it the moment it bit him. Given its value, he could only roll his eyes

and lift it from the ground, his face icy.

When Xuanmin turned, he saw Xue Xian wrestling with something in his hand.

“What did you catch? A spider?”

“Yeah.”

Xue Xian struggled to transfer the slippery bead from his fingers to his palm, gripping it tightly to prevent its escape. Once he’d managed to do so, he scrutinized it beneath the firelight.

The thing in his hand *was* a spider—complete with head, abdomen, eight legs, and a row of bristlelike spines along its side. Its color and markings blended seamlessly with the stone floor. When it was motionless, most people would not have been able to spot it even if they stared their eyes out. Now that it was in Xue Xian’s palm, its camouflage began to fade in color. Within seconds, it’d become a perfect match with Xue Xian’s hand. A deception so masterful, it was awe-inspiring.

Xuanmin had asked his question casually, not expecting that Xue Xian had actually found something. Startled, he strode over. “It really is a spider? Be careful. Don’t let it—”

Before he could finish his sentence, he noticed that the finger Xue Xian had used to pin the spider had already turned a bluish black. The discoloration was creeping up his wrist. The sight was grotesque; his hand resembled a charred chicken claw soaked in vegetable juice.

Resigned, Xue Xian lifted his face at Xuanmin’s approach. Xue Xian’s expression declared his blamelessness. “Bit late for that warning,” he said with a dry chuckle.

Xuanmin said nothing, and Xue Xian sucked in a breath.

Xuanmin frowned and reached out as if to take the venomous spider. “Does it hurt?”

“Not exactly.” Xue Xian’s expression was a mix of amusement and frustration. He wriggled his ring and pinky fingers, evading Xuanmin’s grasp. “This thing’s too slippery. No point taking it now—it’s already bitten me. But do me a favor. My hand’s itching like mad, and I can’t scratch it. Help me out, hurry up…”

Itchiness was the worst torture, far more unbearable than pain. The accursed spider's venom was potent indeed. A mere drop injected into Xue Xian's fingertip had turned his entire arm green. The discoloration was creeping toward his shoulder and neck; if it reached his face, that would be quite the memorable sight.

A maddening itch radiated through his veins, leaving him restless. Anyone with less endurance might have been rolling on the ground in tears by now. Longing for death seemed inevitable. Xue Xian's brows knit as he began to sway on his feet. His eyes burned with strain, then misted over with unshed tears. He took a step toward Xuanmin, wanting to tell him to hurry up, but when his foot touched the ground, he buckled.

At the sight of Xue Xian staggering forward, Xuanmin swept him up and carried him to the stone platform. He tried to pry the spider loose, but Xue Xian's grip was unyielding, trapping it firmly in his palm.

With his back to the wall, Xue Xian slumped to his side, barely upright. "Hurry and scratch it—my hand!"

Dragon blood had the power to neutralize toxins, meaning most of them were ineffective on Xue Xian. At most, a bite might lead to brief swelling or discoloration, but it would vanish almost immediately. This spider's venom, however, was exceptionally potent. Xue Xian struggled to endure it, so it was hard to imagine how anyone else might fare.

But Xuanmin couldn't afford to carelessly scratch Xue Xian as requested, because some venom only worsened when agitated. While the discoloration crawled up to Xue Xian's shoulder, Xuanmin brought out two paper talismans. After slicing into his finger, he inscribed several marks with fluid strokes, then pressed the bloodied talisman to Xue Xian's neck. The advancing greens and blacks immediately stopped upon touching it. Xuanmin pressed the second talisman onto the back of the blackened claw that Xue Xian's hand had become.

Holding Xue Xian's chin, he tilted the latter's face to the left and stretched his neck taut. Xuanmin pulled open Xue Xian's collar and placed his fingers in the hollow of his exposed neck. After a brief measurement, Xuanmin pressed his thumb just below Xue Xian's collarbone, unsealed a coin, and traced its edge while channeling energy into his skin.

His head still cocked to the side, Xue Xian gave a soft exhale. The energy flowed like a cooling stream through his meridians to spread throughout his body, soothing the fiery itch left by the venom. Half the torment vanished at once, while the rest was neutralized by his dragon blood and receded bit by bit.

Xue Xian rubbed his still-tingling hand against Xuanmin's before withdrawing it. Then, he jutted his chin in the direction of the wall.

"You've been staring at that for a while. Figure anything out? Is this thing in my hand the legendary Life-Sharing Spider?"

Now that he'd been bitten, he'd learned his lesson. He adjusted his grip to show Xuanmin the spider. It had transformed yet again—though it was still the same color as his palm, a crimson line now streaked its round abdomen.

Xuanmin's expression was grave. "It drank your blood?"

"It bit me, helped itself to some blood, and then kindly offered me some venom in return. So considerate," he said dryly, rubbing his arm.

Xuanmin said nothing to that.

Xue Xian gestured toward the characters on the wall with his chin. "Does that text really mention the Life-Sharing Spider? What does it say? Where did this thing come from? Why couldn't we find it earlier? And what does this red line mean, that we've shared our lifespans somehow?"

Having fired off several questions in succession, he paused before adding one more that had been lingering in his mind: "They're really obscure, those characters. In all my years, I've never seen anything like them. How…how were you able to read them?"

Xuanmin was taken aback. "You've never seen them before?"

"What, really? Is it actually some common script? I swear I've never seen it. Perhaps someone created it themselves. How do I describe it? It just feels too…archaic and rudimentary."

Xuanmin's face grew drawn as he tried to recall something. After a moment, he looked up at the characters again.

"I can understand them. It feels like I learned them when I was young, but I can't remember who taught me."

Someone taught him? Xue Xian recalled the moment he'd glimpsed in Xuanmin's memories. Xuanmin's vantage point had been low to the ground, and the details had been vague and blurred. All he could make out had been the white robes of another figure almost brushing the floor. Then Xuanmin had said something, just two or three words, like some kind of address.

Now that Xue Xian thought about it, perhaps it had been his master?

For a moment, Xue Xian found it strange. Xuanmin's usual demeanor and habits didn't suggest someone with many personal connections. Living alone in a mist-shrouded bamboo pagoda suited him far better.

At times, Xuanmin seemed more like a being born of nature, utterly detached from the mortal world, even more so than Xue Xian. Yet Xuanmin had once been a small child who'd grown into the man he was today. He'd had parents, teachers, perhaps even disciples—like the child in those fragmented memories who'd asked who Xuanmin was.

The thought of these ties made Xue Xian aware that the Xuanmin he knew was just one facet of the man. As for the rest… Well, perhaps even Xuanmin himself didn't know about them.

Xue Xian fell silent for a long while. When he returned to the present, he found Xuanmin watching him.

"I wouldn't lie to you," Xuanmin said quietly, his dark eyes steady. It seemed he'd misinterpreted Xue Xian's sudden quiet.

Xue Xian started, then relaxed and waved his hand. "I was just remembering something. I'm not accusing you of deception. Monks do not speak falsehoods. I know."

With that, he lazily winked at him.

Xuanmin blinked.

"Speaking of which, I should come clean about something." Xue Xian straightened his collar and his spine. "Those copper coins of yours might be a bit…rebellious," he said awkwardly.

"Rebellious?" Xuanmin glanced at the string of coins hanging from his fingers.

“After I used it a few times to heal my bones, some strange side effects began to appear.”

Saying this, Xue Xian inexplicably felt a pang of guilt, but then he reminded himself—it wasn’t something he could control. Why the hell should he feel guilty?

He paused, shook off the guilt, and said with utmost seriousness, “It may be that the coin’s powers are still hanging around inside me, resulting in…a sort of *connection* between us. Certain emotions and reactions of yours end up bleeding over to me, just like when the dragon saliva… You know. S-something like that.”

His words started off smooth but started to stumble as he went on. By the final sentence, Xue Xian’s tongue was tripping over itself, and he scratched at his cheek as he mumbled his way to the end.

Xuanmin stayed quiet.

“Well, that part’s not a big deal. The important part is, when the seals were last lifted and you regained some memories, I…saw some of them too.” Xue Xian glanced at Xuanmin’s expression and quickly added, “Not much, though! Just a few fragments here and there. I didn’t even catch a full sentence, and it was all hazy, like looking through fog.”

As he spoke, his hand, which had been scratching his cheek, came to a stop. He pointed at the string of coins in Xuanmin’s hand and declared righteously, “Blame that.”

Xuanmin’s lips parted slightly like he wanted to ask something, but he remained silent. His gaze held no anger or any other unpleasant emotions. In the end, he shook his head.

“It’s fine.” Then, in a calm tone, he repeated, “I wouldn’t lie to you. If you saw something, then you saw it.”

His lack of guardedness made Xue Xian’s heart squeeze, but their connection was still an inappropriate one, so he told Xuanmin, “I trust you, but if you have a way to sever this link, you should.”

“We’ll discuss it after we leave,” Xuanmin said readily. His face betrayed no hint of apprehension. He tapped the characters on the stone wall. “According to this, two types of venomous spiders were raised here.

The insects in the lower cavern were meant as their food. With the help of the talisman array, each generation was nurtured for forty-nine years. This was originally done at someone's request, but the requester had passed by the time they matured, so the spiders were sealed here."

"Forty-nine years per generation… When did they start? Who knows how many generations have been bred by now." Xue Xian frowned, unsure whether this was good or bad. Based on the reasoning in the writing, at least, the person who'd bred the spiders here didn't seem outright evil. "What else does it say?"

Xuanmin pointed to the third line. "The spiders are confined within this array. Know not death, and see no life."

"All that text and that's it?" Xue Xian said, perplexed.

"That's the only line related to the Life-Sharing Spider," Xuanmin explained patiently.

That was good enough. The text looked long and rambling, and Xue Xian wouldn't have had the patience to listen to the whole thing. He was fine with getting the key points, so he nodded and didn't press. His fingers, lazily propped on the edge of the stone platform, tapped twice.

"It makes sense…" he mused.

"Hm?"

"That bronze mirror." Xue Xian pointed to the mirror in the corner. "Didn't you just say, 'The spiders are confined within this array. Know not death, and see no life'? Earlier, we searched this place and found no trace of life—because the spiders were trapped in the array. Only by witnessing death through the mirror could we see life. Otherwise, why would those who came before us set up such an array here? They must have used the feeling of near-death to draw the spiders out."

Xuanmin glanced at the mirror and nodded. Then, he skipped past a few columns and pointed to a later line. "This one explains how the Life-Sharing Spider works."

"What?"

Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian's bitten finger in resignation and read: "Life-Sharing Spiders exist as a mother-child pair. The child works in

tandem with the mother, and the effects are activated by blood. When the child spider takes blood from a host, a line of blood appears on its belly. If the paired mother spider then takes blood from another, that person shares the first host's lifespan."

Xue Xian immediately stood up from the stone platform, eyes wide as he scanned the area. "Where's that mother spider?!"

The child spider had already taken a sip of his blood. If the mother spider bit anyone else, that person would gain a dragon's lifespan. If they didn't find the creature now and let it lurk in some corner until they left, the consequences would be catastrophic if someone else stumbled upon it later. If the other person in question was benevolent, giving them a long life might not have been a problem. But what if someone wicked got their hands on it? Wouldn't that give birth to a real thousand-year scourge? No, even if the mother spider bit a saintly person, it still wouldn't have been a good thing. Not everyone could endure a near-endless lifespan. The weight of eternity was far beyond what ordinary mortals could bear.

"The mother and child are linked," said Xuanmin. "Since the child spider is in your hand, she shouldn't be far."

At that, Xue Xian pressed a finger to his lips, telling Xuanmin to stay quiet. Then he gathered up his robes and crouched, listening intently.

With their delicate, spindly legs, the spiders were nearly soundless when moving. Someone with extraordinary hearing could only just manage to detect them. After holding his breath for a moment, Xue Xian suddenly looked up and gestured toward Xuanmin's feet.

The spider was highly sensitive to human movement. If Xue Xian stood up to chase it now, it would scurry away again. He blinked pointedly at Xuanmin, signaling for him to catch it.

Fortunately, Xuanmin was no ordinary person either. Upon getting Xue Xian's message, he silently moved his robes aside and bent his knees until his hand hovered just above the ground. He lightly brushed over the area around himself.

Finally, his fingers paused near a crevice in the wall, and he had to turn a bit to the side. From Xue Xian's angle, only his shoulders and back were visible.

Peering over, Xue Xian saw Xuanmin carefully cupping his hand over the spot, his movements cautious to avoid being bitten. There was a tense pause, then Xuanmin's sleeve swayed as he finally stood up.

It seemed he was worried the spider might bite Xue Xian again. He kept it firmly enclosed in his palm. "There's a small porcelain vial in my pouch."

Xue Xian blinked before realizing what the monk was getting at. "Ah," he said, stepping closer. The child spider was securely pinched between his left fingers, while his right hand hovered in front of Xuanmin's waist. Xue Xian hesitantly reached into the hidden pouch there.

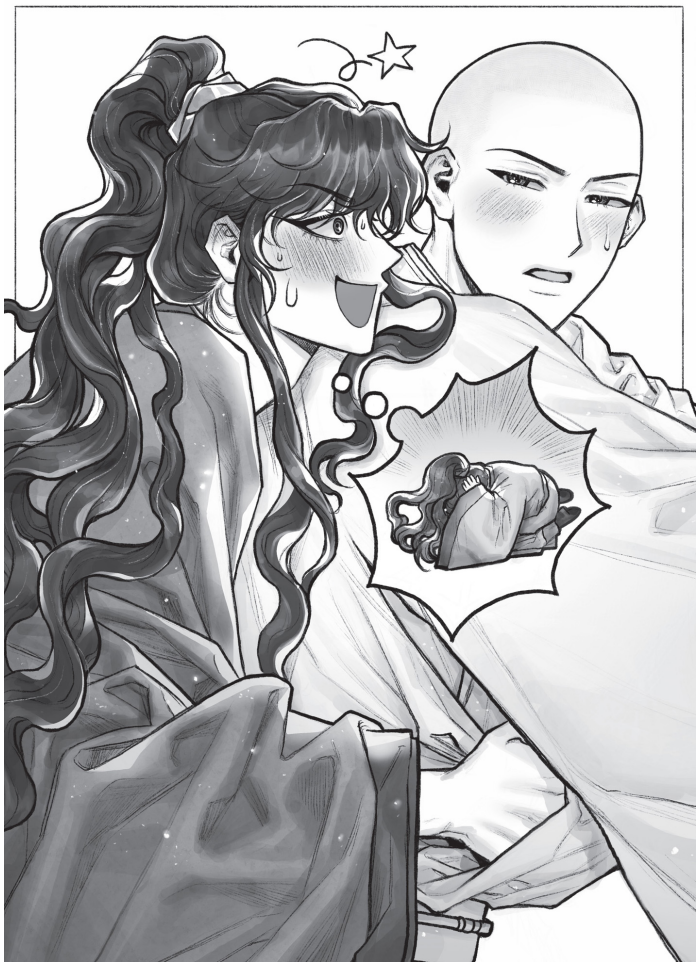
"…Not the one at my waist."

Say that earlier, won't you?! Xue Xian bit his tongue and sheepishly withdrew his hand. Instead, he slipped it into the front of Xuanmin's robes.

For a fleeting instant, he missed his old self—the one who could rummage through Xuanmin's pockets for coins or needles without batting an eye. Now that his thoughts were no longer pure, even the simple act of reaching into Xuanmin's robes was charged. If not for Xuanmin's unwavering focus on the spider in his hand, his expression solemn, Xue Xian's thoughts would have already strayed into dangerous territory.

"Found it," Xue Xian said with forced composure, withdrawing his hand. In his palm lay two tiny, exquisite porcelain vials. Each was no larger than his thumb, round-bellied and flat, just enough to hold fine powders or medicine. Now, they were also the perfect tools for this task.

He popped open the stopper of one, and Xuanmin deftly plucked something from his palm and dropped it inside. Once that hand was free, Xue Xian passed him the other vial and examined the first.



Inside, a round spider skittered around, its color gradually fading to nearly match the white porcelain. At first glance, it looked identical to the child spider that had bitten Xue Xian, except for a thin line of blood atop its head that mirrored the child spider's mark.

Without further thought, Xue Xian stuffed the child spider in as well, sealed the vial, and tucked it away. As he did, he caught Xuanmin corking the other vial from the corner of his eye.

Xue Xian hesitated in confusion. Had Xuanmin's vial even been opened? It didn't seem like it. But when he looked again, Xuanmin had returned the vial to his robes and was studying the characters on the wall, his brow slightly lined.

"What's wrong?" Xue Xian asked, setting aside the mystery of the vial. He tilted his chin toward the wall. "Why that look? Is there a problem?"

Xuanmin tapped the end of the inscription with a curled finger. "The name signed here…"

"That's a signature?" Xue Xian asked curiously. "What about it?"

"It feels familiar," Xuanmin replied.

"Oh? What's the name?"

Xuanmin paused. "Tongdeng."

Tongdeng… Tongdeng…

Upon hearing the name, Xue Xian also froze for a moment. An inexplicable sense of déjà vu rose in his chest, like he, too, had heard the name somewhere before…

That made no sense. If he really had, he wouldn't be drawing a complete blank.

Xue Xian's memory wasn't poor, but he'd lived too long, and most people and events had passed through his life without leaving a mark. Even so, anyone he'd exchanged more than a few words with would stick in his mind for a long time. If something felt familiar, he could usually pinpoint why. This time, it was as if everything he wanted to recall was shrouded in fog—always just out of reach, impossible to grasp.

It took some time, but Xue Xian realized that it wasn't the characters that would have made up *Tongdeng* that felt familiar, but the *sound* of the name.

Where have I heard it before?

He nudged Xuanmin. "You really have no recollection at all?"

"The memories I've recovered don't include this name."

"Of course the critical parts are missing," Xue Xian grumbled. He crossed his arms and absently rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger as he scrutinized the archaic characters. "Those who invent their own scripts are usually from remote clans who keep away from the mortal world. Since this Life-Sharing Spider resembles a gu, the clan likely practiced some form of witchcraft, maybe from the southern borders…"

Not to mention Old Man Qu's earlier claim that the legend had been passed down from his ancestors. For something to be considered "ancestral," it had to date back at least two hundred years.

Two hundred years ago. The southern borders. A name that felt vaguely familiar to both of them. Who could it be?

Xue Xian's thoughts drifted further and further. He mentally flipped through everyone he remembered even a little from two centuries ago, but he came up completely empty. The conditions had zero overlap; he couldn't unearth a single person who fit all three criteria. If even this yielded no clues, then he must've misjudged some key detail.

Since no immediate answers were forthcoming, Xue Xian gestured with one arm, brushing the matter aside for now. But then his fingers twitched, and he paused. He looked at his ring finger and inspected it for a long moment.

"What? Did you think of a lead?" Xuanmin pressed, assuming that was the case.

Instead, Xue Xian thrust his ring finger in front of Xuanmin's face. "Look. A new mole."

He jabbed it so close that Xuanmin had to lean back to study it. At the tip of his otherwise flawless finger was a tiny red dot. "From the spider bite?"

“Mm.” Xue Xian bit his tongue, squinting as he examined it. He jerked his chin toward Xuanmin’s neck. “Rather like the one under your jaw, near your throat. I wonder if it’ll also sprout spider legs like yours from time to time.”

“That…shouldn’t happen yet. The mother spider hasn’t bitten anyone.”

As long as the mother spider hadn’t taken a bite, the so-called “life-sharing bond” remained solely between Xue Xian and the spiders. No secondary link had been established. Xue Xian rubbed the finger with the new red mark and narrowed his eyes. “What if I killed both spiders right now?”

“They won’t die.” Xuanmin tapped the wall again. “Until they bite someone, their lifespan is tied to yours. As long as you live, they will too.”

Two measly little spiders, and he couldn’t do anything to them?! Xue Xian was so infuriated he almost toppled over.

“So I just have to take care of them forever now?” he said icily. “Aren’t they special. Spiders that’ll live for thousands of millennia. Maybe they’ll even become geniuses after weathering a heavenly tribulation with me.”

Xuanmin shook his head, at a loss for words.

“Does the inscription at least say how to break this?” Xue Xian demanded. “That was the whole point of coming here.”

“It does.”

Xue Xian’s expression instantly brightened in the firelight, like jade washed with water. “Really? Let’s hear it. It doesn’t matter how troublesome it is, as long as it removes that thing on your neck.”

“When the recipient of the life sharing dies, the bond breaks,” said Xuanmin succinctly.

Xue Xian blinked.

This is bullshit. Seriously, what kind of stupid and irresponsible bullshit is this?!

It was like digging a pit and just leaving it without filling it in! Xue Xian glared at the sprawling inscription with fury—especially the signature at the end, as if by staring at the name hard enough, his glare could pierce through time and space to reach the person responsible for raising the Life-Sharing Spiders.

He felt a twinge of regret at not being able to read the writing himself. If he could, he would have combed through every character to make sure nothing about the Life-Sharing Spiders slipped by unnoticed. Still, he trusted that the meticulous Xuanmin had studied it even more thoroughly. He would never miss a possible solution, especially when the outcome was so closely tied to his own life.

Xue Xian felt like this entire trip had been a double loss—not only had they failed to break Xuanmin's curse, but he'd also ended up shackling his own lifespan to the damned spiders.

"Enough," Xue Xian muttered. "If there's no solution here, staying any longer is a waste of time. At least I've got the pair of spiders. We may find another way to deal with them later."

For now, the matter of the Life-Sharing Spider had to be set aside. But the person who had arrived before them and left in a hurry? That was a lead worth following.

He ran through the clues in his mind: the peachwood pendant he'd torn off, the walking corpses, and now the array set up with the bronze mirror at the black pool. Xue Xian was certain they all pointed back to the same sorcerer.

Back when Lu Shijiu had performed the divination for them, his results had indicated the sorcerer was still secluded inside a Mount Panlong cave, in Shu. Had he really managed to rush all the way here? What could've prompted him to hurry from Shu to Langzhou?

No amount of thinking would unveil the answer. Better to just chase the man down and interrogate him directly.

Fortunately, if there was one thing Xue Xian excelled at, it was speed. Even if the sorcerer had a head start, catching up would be child's play.

“He couldn’t have gone far,” Xue Xian said, standing once more at the edge of the black pool and studying the mess of bloodstains.

“Hm?” Xuanmin left the inscriptions and walked over, following Xue Xian’s gaze to the ground.

“Look.” Xue Xian pointed at a few distinct handprints. “The bloodstains are too messy. It *looks* like there was a struggle, which is why we thought that at first. But all the blood is confined to one area, and these handprints belong to the same person. So…he probably set up the array, lured out a pair of Life-Sharing Spiders, got bitten, and in his agony, did this to himself.”

If even dragon blood couldn’t instantly neutralize the spiders’ venom, how could an ordinary mortal withstand it? Judging by the sheer amount of blood spilled, the recipient of the bite had to have been in a wretched state. How could he have recovered quickly enough to escape?

The more Xue Xian studied the stains, the clearer the picture became. He examined the handprints on the white stones by the pool and the streaks of dried blood nearby, then gathered up his robes and dropped into a crouch. He pressed his ear to the ground near the water’s edge.

“I know where he is now,” Xue Xian said suddenly, opening his eyes.

Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian, then at the pool. “He escaped through the water.”

“Exactly.” Xue Xian straightened up and beckoned to Xuanmin. “If we’re going to chase someone, might as well take the shortcut.”

Xuanmin stared at the brackish water that’d been stagnant for what was clearly a long time. He said nothing.

“Relax. I’m not a big fan of fire, but the control of water is well within my grasp.” Xue Xian stood and dusted off his hands, then reached out for Xuanmin.

As he took Xuanmin’s hand, Xue Xian’s eyes returned to those archaic characters. A thought struck him.

“Didn’t you mention there were two types of venomous spiders here? One is the Life-Sharing Spider, but what’s the other? Could it be what Old

Man Qu kept rambling about, a spider whose bite can bind people together for three lives?”

Xuanmin’s lowered lashes fluttered. He looked up at Xue Xian. “Do you want it?”

“Not really,” Xue Xian said, shaking his head. “What would I do with it? My lifespan is already longer than three mortal lifetimes. Besides, does it feel any better to get bitten by one of those? I’m just asking, since you avoided bringing any of it up earlier.”

Xuanmin’s calm eyes swept over the wall once more, just for a moment.

“It’s not about binding entire lifetimes. The rumors are wrong. It only binds fortune and misfortune.”

Xue Xian wasn’t actually interested in the spiders; it was just that a stray thought had popped into his mind, and he’d briefly wondered about those tales of “three lifetimes of love and hate” that people often spoke about. Xuanmin’s clipped response was enough for him. He nodded, then quirked his mouth into a smile before he yanked Xuanmin’s hand.

Splash!

The two plunged sideways into the black pool, sending up a spray of water that splattered onto the stones and wetted the half-dried bloodstains anew. As they sank into the water, a massive bubble of air enveloped them, carrying them swiftly downward until they vanished into the depths.

Chapter 35:
Valley Array

BENEATH THE BLACK POOL, the lack of daylight cast an illusion of deep night, but it was not yet noon in the world outside.

Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi hadn't entered the county town's gates. Instead, they'd settled in a roadside tea shop near the outskirts. The shop was neither bustling nor empty. There was little danger, the tables were spaced far enough apart that they didn't have to speak too cautiously, and they could keep an eye on the mountain path at all times. It was perfect for them.

"Think they've caught up yet?" Shitou Zhang asked. He sat facing the mountain path and sipped his tea while staring intently at the road, hoping to see Xuanmin and Xue Xian appear. "For some reason, my eyelid's been twitching since this morning. It's making me uneasy. But they're both so formidable. There's no way anything could happen to them, right?"

Lu Nianqi had no object to divine information from, so he idly tapped the table with his sticks. Though he appeared calm, that small gesture betrayed his unease. But Shitou Zhang was a nervous fellow; if Lu Nianqi voiced his concern, the man might tremble hard enough to knock the table over. Instead, he shook his head and put on a dismissive tone:

"Who can say? Maybe you just didn't sleep well."

Two men with bamboo baskets who seemed prepared to head up the mountain sat at the table beside Lu Nianqi and Shitou Zhang. The strangers chatted intermittently as they ate, their voices drifting over.

"Did you pass by the river this morning?"

"I did. No idea what's going on with the water. It rose like crazy overnight! When I went by this morning, it was nearly up to my shoes. One little movement and it would have overflowed."

“Yeah, in the middle of winter, too. Why’s it flooding all of a sudden? Strange.”

“Strange things happen every year. Maybe it’ll recede by tonight. Speaking of… Did you see those two groups rushing through town this morning? One in gray, the other all in white. It was downright eerie.”

The other man snorted. “You’re so clueless. I didn’t see the ones in gray, but the white-robed ones? They’re from the Court of Imperial Sacrifices. Big shots. Look all you want, but keep your mouth shut around them.”

Their conversation abruptly cut off as a dozen or so gray-clad figures entered the tea shop. They wore masks and bamboo hats, bizarre attire that made it look like they’d wandered out of a temple fair or opera.

Shitou Zhang’s fingers tightened around his teacup as his unease grew. He faintly heard one of the gray-clad figures murmur, “Do the birth charts match?”

“Yes, right here,” another replied in a low voice. “But—”

“Doesn’t matter. Take everyone,” a third voice interjected.

Cold sweat broke out on Shitou Zhang’s forehead. He nudged Lu Nianqi’s hand, wanting to pull him away from these strange men, but before he could stand, a hum like the sound of empty bamboo rang in his ears. His vision went dark, his legs buckled, and he lost consciousness.

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of Wuchang Prefecture, a long procession of white-robed figures rode at a gallop along the road. Their white robes were embroidered with ancient beast motifs on the front, and their faces were hidden behind savage but solemn masks. As they traveled, their white robes billowed behind them like clouds.

The chief diviner and the chief ritualist were still leading the Court of Imperial Sacrifices’ procession.

Earlier, while passing through Wuchang Prefecture, they’d heard from a passerby that two other groups from Taichang Temple had already gone past, which left the townsfolk both curious and fearful. Such a large deployment from the court never boded well, because it usually meant a

major calamity had happened somewhere or an omen had threatened the security of the imperial court.

The past two years had borne the weight of ill fortune—unpredictable seasons, droughts, and floods. Winters came early and lasted too long, devouring spring and autumn in their path. The winters dragged on, with heavy snowfall all the way from the northern deserts to the southern mountains. The bone-chilling cold punctuated by sporadic rains cast a suffocating pall over the people.

It had all begun with a baseless rumor: the tale of a dragon falling into the sea, portending troubled times ahead. Some believed them, others dismissed them, but now that the court was making frequent appearances, even the skeptics were unsettled. It was as if a thousand-pound sword hung over their heads, impossible to defend against and ready to drop without warning.

The chief diviner's group had originally been following traces of the true dragon without a clear destination, but upon hearing of the other court members' movements, they'd become certain they needed to head west.

Before long, they received a message by carrier pigeon from the junior minister. The letter warned of an impending disaster in the next few days. They'd received orders from the state preceptor to rush to Lake Dongting, while another cavalry unit was heading to Mount Wanshi by the river in Langzhou. The message urged the chief diviner and chief ritualist to complete their tasks quickly and await further instructions from the state preceptor.

Sure enough, as they neared Yuezhou Prefecture, the chief diviner found her fingers on the reins burning faintly. Her delicate brow creased behind her mask; she slowed her horse and released the reins.

As she let go, a hint of yellow flame sparked between her fingers—not scalding, but still hot. A thin sheet of paper emerged from the golden tongue of flame, growing clearer as the fire dimmed.

The chief diviner raised a hand to signal a halt. The entire lengthy procession stopped at a fork in the road.

"What did the state preceptor say?" the chief ritualist asked.

“He wants us to go to Daze Temple on Mount Jiangsong,” she replied, passing him the paper.

“Daze Temple? That haunted place? There aren’t even any monks there. What does he want us to do?”

But the state preceptor had laid his instructions out clearly in black and white: *Arrive at Daze Temple before one in the afternoon.* Guard the array.

“‘Guard the array’?” the chief ritualist read out in surprise.

Behind her mask, the chief diviner’s expression shifted slightly. After a pause, she murmured, “Lake Dongting, Mount Wanshi, Daze Temple—these places are hundreds of miles apart. We’re to guard the array. What about the junior minister’s team? Will they do the same?”

“Probably not. If so, how enormous would this array be? It’d be beyond anything we’ve ever encountered,” the chief ritualist said.

“But I think…” The chief diviner hesitated, leaving a long pause before she spoke again. “Never mind. Let’s hurry to Daze Temple first.”

Time was tight if they were to reach Daze Temple before one. They didn’t have the luxury to linger in further thought. With a wave, the chief ritualist and chief diviner spurred their horses forward and led the group straight toward Mount Jiangsong.

While they were taking a shortcut around Yuezhou Prefecture, Xue Xian and Xuanmin rose from the depths of the black waters, still encased in their bubble. Carried by the current, they eventually surfaced in a spring. The moment they broke the water’s surface, the bubble burst with a pop, and the curtain of mountain water cascading down the cliff nearby drenched them from head to toe.

Wordlessly, they climbed ashore. Xuanmin wrote a cleansing spell in the air over both of them. In the blink of an eye, the water evaporated, leaving their robes dry, light, and free of any lingering dampness—even the film of sweat from the blazing dragon baking them earlier was gone.

Xue Xian shook out his black robes with satisfaction. Once he’d flicked off the last droplet, he surveyed their surroundings.

They were in a deep mountain hollow, though it was quite unlike the one on Mount Boji where Xuanmin's bamboo pagoda had been located. Here, all they saw were towering, precipitous stone peaks arranged like the fingers of an upturned hand, cupping them within. The cliffs carved the sky away, leaving only a glimpse of it directly overhead. It was like a natural well.

"There are three peaks in total," Xue Xian said, pointing at the nearest one. That peak towered into the clouds, its walls so steep they seemed to have been pared by a knife. By contrast, its top hooked like an eagle's beak, beneath which hung dense curtains of green vines, twisting and winding. "Look familiar?"

Though he'd phrased it as a question, his tone was certain—this matched the description of the entrance to Baichong Cave as given by Old Man Qu. Though this legendary entrance had been their exit, it still gave Xue Xian and Xuanmin a general idea of where they were: in the vicinity of Langzhou's Mount Xia.

The moment Xue Xian emerged from the spring pool, he felt the thick yin energy within the valley. Though not as foul as the corpse shop, it still carried a stale, rotting stench, as if a wooden box sealed tight for decades had been pried open. The damp air mixed with the scent of dust made the area feel gloomy and abandoned. Instinct told him that people had died here, and not just one or two.

He frowned at the wild grass by his feet. He nudged it lightly with his toe and, sure enough, discovered traces of blood near the roots, blending almost invisibly into the wet mud.

"Found it," he said. He patted Xuanmin, but there was no response.

Xue Xian looked up at Xuanmin and saw his attention pull back from the sea of wild grasses, like he'd been somewhere far away. He looked at what Xue Xian was pointing to with his foot and grasped his meaning.

"Mm. The blood hasn't congealed yet."

Xue Xian withdrew his foot. "What's wrong with you?" he asked in a low voice, while still listening to the sounds in the valley.

"I…" Xuanmin was oddly hesitant. "I think…I've been here before."

Xue Xian darted his eyes at Xuanmin before looking away. Instead of lingering on the comment, Xue Xian followed the trail of blood droplets forward.

“Honestly. Why does everything seem familiar to you?” Xue Xian said, keeping his tone light.

In truth, he’d been grappling with a nagging sense of unease throughout their journey. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed as though he had missed something crucial. Something was off, but it kept slipping his mind, or he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. He’d carried this odd feeling the whole way, and now it suddenly clicked. This discomfort wasn’t just unease; it was a nameless sense of crisis, like he’d ignored a serious latent threat, knowingly or unknowingly.

Xuanmin didn’t answer Xue Xian’s question right away. He only lowered his eyes. His expression remained stoic, but an indescribable weight seemed to settle over him, as though he were carrying an immense burden.

A moment later, Xuanmin closed his eyes, then reopened them and shook his head. “It’s—”

Xue Xian blinked and cut Xuanmin off before he could continue. “Let’s find this person first. Your memory hasn’t improved much. Recalling things won’t be so easy. Maybe once the seal on another coin is broken, things will become clearer.”

“Mm.” Xuanmin seemed to sense something from Xue Xian, but he didn’t say more before striding ahead.

The bloodstains Xue Xian had discovered really did expose the other party’s trail. After barely any effort, the two of them stopped outside a small stone forest. The forest was less than forty yards in length and width, not large at all, but it was an excellent location for an Eight Gates array. If someone were hiding in it, they could stall any pursuers for a while… provided they weren’t up against Xue Xian.

“What’s the point of hiding in there?” Xue Xian stopped and said to the stone forest in a bored tone, “If you were hiding in town, I might have to watch out for other people, but you’re way out here in the mountains, so I

have no such reservations. Do you really think a few paltry rocks can stop me?”

A single swipe of his dragon tail would reduce them to nothing. The only reason Xue Xian had taunted the stranger instead of attacking outright was to see if the man had any tricks up his sleeve. If he did, better to draw them out and deal with everything in one go.

After Xue Xian’s words, the stone forest fell into a brief, eerie silence before a low, hoarse laugh sounded. It was broken and halting, as if the speaker was gravely injured. Then the laughter ceased, and a sharp, piercing whistle rose.

“Since you’ve chased me to my doorstep, I ought to show some hospitality,” the voice rasped.

Accompanying his words was a tide of wailing that crashed in like the sea, engulfing everything. As the cries rose, the patch of sky overhead was swallowed. Thick clouds swarmed, ensnaring all light and plunging the entire valley into gloom.

Xue Xian suddenly remembered that a century ago, a great fire sparked by lightning had raged through the mountains of Langzhou. It was said that the flames burned for three days and three nights, consuming every last villager living in the valley. That year, rumors spread of people hearing the mountains weep. In reality, it hadn’t been the mountains that were weeping; it’d been the countless ghosts of those who’d perished in the fire wailing in unison.

Xue Xian felt the very ground quiver beneath the weight of their cries. The deserted valley echoed with a cacophony of rumbling as the earth split open. Corpses buried for a century shed their decaying flesh and clawed their way out of the soil, and an immense, overwhelming wave surged toward Xue Xian and Xuanmin.

Commanding so many yin corpses was no ordinary feat. The one hiding in the stone forest could not have been an insignificant underling. This was surely the sorcerer Songyun himself.

When Xue Xian realized this, he felt a sharp pain lance through his spine—as if the agony of having his tendons and bones ripped out during his calamity had resurfaced. He knew that it was just the fine threads

extending from his spine trembling under the influence of the countless yin spirits, but the agony of his fractured bones only stoked his fury. Past grievances merged with present hatred. The stench of decay filled the air as the endless tide of corpses eddied toward them, drowning the stone forest. Xue Xian's expression turned frosty with rage.

He waited motionless, watching the onslaught of corpses, then tossed his sleeve. A thick veil of mist swallowed him whole.

Moments later, a black dragon soared into the sky, piercing the clouds with a deafening roar. The mountains shuddered as chaotic thunderbolts wrapped in gale-force winds slashed into the valley. Streaks of lightning struck with ruthless precision.

The densely packed corpses in the valley were blasted apart like a scattered hornet's nest. The stone forest exploded under the thunderous assault, and within the flying debris, a gray figure rolled across the ground and vanished into the sea of corpses. As he slipped into the tide, he cloaked himself in an illusion, blending seamlessly with the rotting corpses. For a moment, it was impossible to distinguish him.

Xue Xian circled the mountains once before sweeping his massive tail down with earth-shattering force, smashing it into the valley.

Boom!

Where his tail landed, a spiderweb of fissures snaked outward. The raging storm sent corpses flying by the dozens before they crashed back down in heaps, shattering into fragments of bone and flesh. Entire mounds of corpses were swept into the deep chasms. Simultaneously, a fiery dragon erupted from one side of the valley, its wild flames licking upward as it howled through the whipping wind, dragging wave after wave of yin corpses into the inferno.

Xue Xian hovered amid the black clouds, watching with cold fury as the wailing corpses struggled and fell under the onslaught. Yet his true quarry, Songyun, scurried about like a rat in the sewers, transforming himself into a corpse, complete with decaying flesh sloughing off white bones.

What was the point of hiding? What difference did it make if he died now, compared to minutes later?

The threads in Xue Xian’s spine quivered with fury, growing increasingly unstable as his spiritual energy drained. The pain stabbed into his muscles and bones; Xue Xian couldn’t ignore it. But the pain only fueled his rage.

In mere moments, the majority of the corpses had fallen victim to the thunder and flames. They were shattered by the dragon tail and tumbled into the depths within the fissures as the valley quaked.

Amid the wails of the corpses, a hoarse scream rang out.

Xue Xian laughed maliciously, and his tail whipped across the stone peak without hesitation. With a deafening crack, the peak split at its midpoint, collapsing into the valley along with countless boulders, directly onto the source of the scream. Dust and smoke billowed up, forming a cloud that carried the smell of soil and grit.

The horde of corpses in that area, along with the voice, were now pinned beneath the fallen peak. Even if they weren't crushed, they'd never rise again.

Was that it? Had he gotten his revenge just like that?

Xue Xian had never intended to question the sorcerer. In his eyes, exchanging even a single word with Songyun was beneath him. No excuse or explanation was worth hearing, nor did he care to ask anything. Allowing the man to speak another word or live a moment longer was far too much mercy.

Yet the ease with which he had sent his enemy into the abyss left Xue Xian with an indescribable irritation. After he'd spent half a year dragging his paralyzed legs across countless locations, the foe he'd confronted had been silenced in less than an hour. It was like punching cotton. His fury not only remained unvented but flared higher.

The shattered bones littering the valley began to rustle and stir in the wind. Within an instant, they reassembled into a legion of yin corpses, and those that had been swallowed by the fissures raised their heads from the darkness. Unscathed by lightning, unburned by fire. They had shattered only to reform, fallen into the depths only to claw their way back out.

Now, *this* was a true haunting. In his fury, Xue Xian actually laughed —because amid the clattering of reknitting bones, he heard the faint sound of breathing, forcibly suppressed. It no longer came from where the peak had fallen.

As the corpses stood again and charged forward, Xuanmin's fingers closed around his string of copper coins.

The corpses thrashed and lunged. Their oppressive yin energy and century-old resentment at their unjust deaths clung like a spiderweb, ensnaring every living organism in range. Neither Xuanmin nor Xue Xian could break free from its grip. The stronger a being's yang energy, the greater the pull, which made the dragon in their midst the perfect target.

Since the beginning of time, yin and yang had been intertwined. No one could change that. The profound resentment emanating from an army of yin corpses could blight entire landscapes. It would have flayed most targets like a storm of knives, enough to strip them to white bone. Xue Xian

and Xuanmin could subdue it to some extent, but they couldn’t negate it entirely.

The tide of corpses revived again and again, and thin cuts began to appear on the two men, as if countless fine blades were brushing against them.

The longer this dragged on, the more wounds accumulated, while the yin resentment grew thicker each time the corpses were destroyed. Every time they were struck down, the resentment sprang anew, trapping them in a cycle with no end in sight.

Xue Xian didn’t care about the cuts. Being drenched in blood mattered little to him—it was nothing compared to the agony he’d suffered during his tribulation. In his frigid anger, he kept hunting for the sorcerer, planning to blast him and everything nearby to smithereens.

Then, he caught a glimpse of Xuanmin’s white-robed figure and paused in surprise.

Xuanmin was looking up at him.

Xue Xian was high in the heavens; Xuanmin was far away in the valley below. The distance between them should have been too much for them to see each other’s faces. Yet Xue Xian felt that Xuanmin’s gaze carried something unbearably heavy.

Xuanmin raised a hand and caught something in the air. He rubbed it between his fingers.

Xue Xian saw a smear of red on Xuanmin’s fingertips and realized—he had caught a drop of blood that had fallen from the dragon.

A painful emotion welled in Xue Xian’s chest. It was as if beneath his skin, a very tender, very vulnerable part of himself had been pricked by a needle. The sting was so sudden that he didn’t immediately understand its cause.

Before he could dwell on it, Xuanmin lowered his gaze and touched the string of copper coins.

Since fire and thunder were useless, Xuanmin withdrew his blazing dragon. He seemed to be murmuring a sutra, and as his fingers brushed the coins, a brilliant light ignited within them. The spiritual energy sealed

inside had suddenly awakened. Of the five coins, the three that had been unsealed shone with blinding radiance, so intense that even Xue Xian, high above, found them dazzling.

The moment the coins were roused by blood, Xue Xian's spine burned with heat. He froze, then realized the sting earlier might not have been his at all. Rather, it had been what Xuanmin felt, transmitted through the coins' connection. The vague sensation had felt so much like Xue Xian's own.

The coins began to hum in the wind, interrupting Xue Xian's thoughts. Xuanmin, chanting, held them in one hand while he moved the fingers of his other. An intricate rune rose through the debris and fog. With the deep sound of a tolling bell, it slammed down upon the tide of corpses.

Clang!

The rune landed, and a shudder rippled through the army of yin corpses, as if their souls had been struck. Their vibrations matched the fading echoes of an ancient bell.

Yes, lightning was futile and fire impotent, for yin resentment wasn't something they could banish. Instead, Xuanmin was performing rites for countless vengeful souls, offering them rest all at once. He endured the agony of stabbing blades, his countenance tranquil as he continued to chant, eyes closed.

Clang!

Another strike. The yin corpses in the valley stopped as if bewitched, then slowly turned around. The yin resentment receded from Xue Xian. Would they target Xuanmin instead?

Xuanmin tapped his copper coins rhythmically, again and again. The viscous miasma of resentment finally abandoned Xue Xian and pulsed toward Xuanmin until it enveloped him in layer upon layer of suffocating weight. The horde of corpses howled madly under the ceaseless tolls of that phantom bell.

Xue Xian found himself taken aback by the shift. Then, with one whip of his dragon tail, his massive form dissolved into a swirling black mist that plunged straight into the valley.

He crashed down in front of Xuanmin, the sheer force of his descent enough to send clusters of corpses flying. The valley rumbled as the black mist dispersed, revealing Xue Xian's black-clad human form standing protectively in front of Xuanmin.

Xue Xian raised a hand as if to shield him from the tsunami of resentment bearing down on them—but then a hollow, searing pain lanced through his spine. After everything he'd done earlier, he'd drained too much of his spiritual energy. The fragile threads that barely held his spine together were on the verge of snapping once more. For an instant, the feeling in his legs almost vanished. Unable to control himself, he stumbled.

The glow from the copper coins in Xuanmin's hands flared, and the coins themselves oscillated wildly as Xuanmin's fingers traced their edges, faster and faster. Almost like they were trembling with eagerness or struggling under unbearable strain. The fourth coin's dull, ashen surface began to flake away, revealing a golden sheen beneath its peeling shell.

Clang!

Xuanmin's eyes remained closed, like he was unaware of his tumultuous surroundings. His deep, measured voice recited the sutras, each word striking like a hammer against a bell, resonating directly in the mind.

Amid the overwhelming tide of yin resentment, amid the writhing and shrieking of the corpses, the last fleck of gray on the fourth copper coin fell away. It shivered, hard.

A sharp click echoed in Xue Xian's mind, like a lock that had just been picked open. That was the shared sensation of the coin's seal breaking transmitted from Xuanmin. The reverberation was impossible to resist: A sudden wave of dizziness crashed over Xue Xian. His vision turned dark, followed by fragmented scenes plunging forward like a flood.

Xue Xian's perspective abruptly shifted, as though he had been pulled into the body of a child. His gaze, no longer under his control, slid downward to fix upon the hem of a robe before him.

The ground was cloaked with heavy snow that almost reached his knees. A low desk was in front of him. Books were spread across its surface while a brush rested on a stand, the ink at its tip encrusted in a thin layer of ice.

A muffled voice drifted down from above him. “You were born with Buddha bones. That must not be squandered. Stay here and transcribe the scriptures. I will come back for you when night falls.”

He said nothing, just lifted the brush to moisten it in the inkstone before he pressed it to the thin paper.

Time blurred, and soon the sky darkened. The characters on the page were no longer legible. Xue Xian heard the crunch of snow as someone approached the desk. He lifted his eyes just enough to see the white-robed figure return. Still, he did not look at the man’s face. With something that seemed like both reverence and indifference, he settled on the man’s hands.

The man produced a copper brazier from his sleeve and offered it to him. “Are you cold?” he asked, voice solemn.

Xue Xian wanted to scoff. *Try standing here all day and see if you’re cold!*

What actually emerged was a curt “No.”

The voice’s tone remained indistinct, both inches away and decades distant, but Xue Xian could tell it was a child’s voice. It possessed a coldness utterly uncharacteristic of a child, though.

The man sighed. “Your shifu has no wish to harm you. I simply do not wish for you to waste your life when you were blessed with Buddha bones.” As he spoke, he pressed the brazier into the child’s arms, then kindly patted the back of his head with a large hand before leading him through the deep snow toward a small building in the distance.

Xue Xian clung to a sliver of clarity in his dreamlike haze: This was Xuanmin’s memory.

Without warning, another wave of dizziness churned in Xue Xian’s skull. He shut his eyes and shook his head.

When he opened his eyes again, the scene before him had fragmented, transforming into chaos. Sometimes it showed a cold, empty hall, other times a pavilion. At times, silence enveloped him; at others, faint murmurs of conversation drifted from beyond the courtyard. His perspective shifted, rising and falling, as if the memories weren’t unfolding in order.

Then, as warmth flared along his spine and a faint hum buzzed in his ears, his connection with Xuanmin stabilized. The fragmented scenes grew a little clearer.

A desk lay before him once more. A messenger pigeon perched obediently on one corner, resting. A peaceful scene, yet it seemed laced with a trace of fear.

In his hand was a folded sheet of paper covered in sprawling handwriting. At a glance, he only caught the red seal at the bottom, where a few characters were stamped. He'd barely made out two before his fingers moved on their own, refolding the paper and setting it aside.

Those two characters were: *Taichang*.

He picked up the brush from its stand, dipped it in ink, and wrote a few brief words on another sheet: *Must not delay the journey to Mount Tai.*

Then, beneath it, he added two more characters—

Tongdeng.

A dull roar filled Xue Xian's mind. He thought he must have misread, but before he could look closer, the scene trembled and shifted abruptly once more.

He stood by the railing of a high pavilion. A palace lantern cast a hazy glow beside him.

The lingering confusion from seeing "Tongdeng" had yet to fade, leaving Xue Xian dazed for a long moment before he realized someone behind him was speaking. He didn't catch what was said, but he turned mechanically, walked to a stone table in the pavilion, and pushed a sheet of paper forward. Then, he opened his mouth to speak.

Though the scene remained vague and the voice distant, Xue Xian could still recognize Xuanmin's timbre. He heard himself speak with Xuanmin's cold and detached voice.

"The year of Wuchen. The seventh day of the sixth month."

Xuanmin said more after that, or perhaps he asked a question, but Xue Xian didn't register a single word. A deafening buzz filled his ears. It was as if his entire body had turned to ice. That indifferent sentence looped over and over in his mind, and with each repetition, the chill deepened.

The stabbing pain in his spine flared again, but Xue Xian sensed nothing.

The year of Wuchen was this very year. And the seventh day of the sixth month was none other than the day of his tribulation. Or rather…the day his tendons and bones had been ripped out.

Disbelief crashed over Xue Xian, a suffocating weight that crushed downward, entangling him. In his daze, he desperately searched the scene for any other detail—anything that could prove those words a mere coincidence.

But he only found the edge of the stone table, where something caught his eye. The moment it did, a feeling flickered in his hollow chest, so faint it didn't seem like his own. An emotion that might have been disgust.

Xue Xian had no mind to dwell on it, because he saw what was set on the table: two masks. One was silver, gleaming coldly under the lantern light. The other was painted with bold, archaic beast motifs, its solemn design flanked by long, knotted tendrils resembling wild hair taken from an actual beast. When worn, it would look like flowing locks from a distance…

He stared at the beast-patterned mask, his mind blank. The pain in his spine sharpened.

It was unbearable, like the agony of his missing spine had seeped into his heart only to radiate outward, tingeing his thoughts with panic—and a little grief.

The chaotic memories that followed blurred past, vanishing only when the copper coins' hum grew distinct once more.

Xue Xian suddenly squeezed his eyes shut, and after a long wait, he opened them.

The valley came back into focus, right in front of Xue Xian but somehow distant, as if it were in another world.

At some point, Xuanmin had landed on a low peak nearby. The bell-like tolls lingered, echoing through the valley as the corpses' shrieks turned to wails. The century-old miasma of resentment slowly dissipated.

A thick mist that obscured Xuanmin's face had risen in the valley. Xue Xian could only see him turn toward his direction, the copper coins still glowing in his hand. Pale golden runes formed a wide net, enveloping the entire valley.

The light wasn't bright, but it seared Xue Xian's eyes. It reminded him of the golden threads that had bound him by the shore.

The grief that had been small surged larger in his chest, heavier than he'd imagined, more suffocating than that inescapable net. It left even him a little stunned.

Then, from beneath the piles of bones in the valley, a voice rang out in shock and confusion.

"St-State Preceptor? Why…why are you here?! Didn't the message say to meet at Mount Jiangsong?"

The man, who'd been tumbling about among the yin corpses, had revealed himself upon recognizing Xuanmin. His disguise still clung to him, making him nearly indistinguishable from the yin corpses. Chunks of rotting flesh had fallen away during his frantic escape, exposing a jumble of crooked bones; the surfaces were yellowed and blackened, reeking of decay. But the real corpses around him had collapsed under the golden light and been reduced to shattered bones, though wisps of resentment still clung to them. As he stood upright among them, he was impossible to miss.

His head was a mere skull, cracked and wrapped in dried skin, the eye sockets empty voids, making his expression difficult to read—but from his gaping jaw, he seemed beyond bewildered.

Had Xue Xian struck now, the man wouldn't have reacted in time. However, Xue Xian could no longer see him. Beyond the golden light of Xuanmin's coins, the valley might as well not have existed. All Xue Xian registered was the pain in his spine, an agony that stabbed into his heart. It was like watching a blade sink into his chest. Terrifying coldness filled him, bitter as the deepest winter.

Rocks, golden light, and thick mist separated him from Xuanmin. Xue Xian made no move to clear the haze. Through the watery mist, he stared silently at the white figure on the peak before repeating softly, "State Preceptor?"

In that instant, countless past details, both relevant and irrelevant, clear and foggy, flooded his mind in a disordered rush. With his single utterance of “state preceptor,” they abruptly snapped into focus:

Unusual abilities. Ties to the government. A personality that was fastidious to a fault. That procession they’d encountered at Mount Boji…

In truth, the clues about Xuanmin’s identity had been everywhere. The vague unease plaguing him over the past few days, especially after they’d entered Baichong Cave, now revealed itself to be a subconscious dread, laced with even a hint of fear…

He’d sensed it for a long time. He’d just chosen to ignore it.

Even now, after experiencing Xuanmin’s memories firsthand through the coins, he clung to one last shred of hope. He still wanted to hear it from Xuanmin’s own lips. He’d play the fool, if only Xuanmin would deny it—if only he’d say no—

“The year of Wuchen. The seventh day of the sixth month…” Xue Xian murmured, staring at the white silhouette behind the mist.

The figure seemed to stiffen, but the mist was too thick. He couldn’t be sure if he was seeing things.

“What does that date mean?” Xue Xian asked, his voice eerily calm.

In his entire life, he had never cared so deeply for another’s answer. For a second, he almost regretted the question, wanted to take it back. He feared the truth like he never had before.

But the man on the peak had once told him, *“I won’t lie to you.”*

Xuanmin was silent for what felt like an eternity—so long that Xue Xian’s chest went numb. Then, in a low, rough voice, he answered: “A dragon’s tribulation…”

Xue Xian’s lashes fluttered. He closed his eyes.

When they opened again, his face was blank. He cast a final glance at Xuanmin, then with a calm that bordered on terrifying, he said one word: “Excellent.”

Chapter 36:
Rivers of Blood

DOZENS OF MILES AWAY from Mount Jiangsong, in a small temple nestled against the hills, a young novice with a boyish face sat cross-legged by the window, reading scriptures. Just as he was about to turn the page, dark clouds gathered outside, accompanied by flashes of lightning and rumbles of thunder.

The novice set down the scripture and leaned out of the window to look.

Their temple was built against the mountain, and it was the highest point for miles around. From his vantage point, he could just make out another mountain in the distance. It stood before a vast river with a solitary temple perched atop it.

The dark clouds and thunder had come out of nowhere, without any sign, as if the heavens were suddenly grief-stricken and venting their wrath. The thunderclouds spread across the sky in an instant. They hung low and oppressive, pressing down on the temple roof with such weight that it felt as though one could reach out and touch them.

The novice found the sight both strange and fascinating and stretched out his hand to try. But before he could uncrook his fingers, a downpour began.

The rain poured down in such torrents that the distant mountain vanished from sight, leaving behind only the faint silhouette of that lone temple. His hands were stunned by the pelting raindrops, and the gray sleeves of his robe were instantly drenched. The wet fabric plastered uncomfortably to his skin and clung to his arms, but the novice paid it no mind. He kept his eyes on the torrential downpour.

For some reason, he felt as though the rain was a manifestation of some overwhelming sorrow, and it filled him with a sadness. He, too, felt as if he were trapped inside those dark clouds and struggling to breathe.

Being young and having spent most of his life in the mountains, he rarely felt such unprompted emotions. He suddenly remembered a line from the scripture he'd just read, a phrase he couldn't comprehend: *From love springs worry, from love springs fear.* If one is free from love, there is neither worry nor fear.

He stared at the rain in a daze for a long time, until his senior brother came in and told him to close the window.

"Shixiong,[2] I think I saw someone at that mountain temple earlier," the novice said. He turned toward the newcomer and pointed toward the faint, smoky shadow of the temple in the distance.

His senior brother chuckled. "What kind of eyes do you have, to spot someone from that far away? Impossible. That's Daze Temple—a notorious ghost temple. It's been abandoned for who knows how many years. There's no one there."

"I really saw someone," the novice insisted. "Before the rain started. They were dressed in white, right at the top of the pagoda. When I looked again, they were gone." He murmured a quiet "Amitabha," because his thoughts had drifted to ghosts and spirits.

Even without his senior brother's words, he'd known that lonely building was Daze Temple. When he was younger, he'd overheard his monastic siblings mention it in passing. Many years ago—perhaps a hundred, perhaps two hundred—a young man from the southern border had his head shaved at Daze Temple. Before he could take his vows, the temple was struck by lightning and set ablaze. All the monks perished in the fire. Whenever the common folk brought up Daze Temple, not only did they lament its fate, they also speculated that the boy from the southern border was some kind of jinx, bringing misfortune upon others and himself.

A decade or so later, rumors spread that a white-robed monk had been seen near Mount Jiangsong. There, apparently, he picked up an abandoned infant from the ruined gates of Daze Temple before leaving. A woodcutter who claimed to have seen the monk swore that when the monk rolled up his sleeves, his wrists bore tattoos unique to the southern border.

Decades later, another white-robed monk had been spotted near Mount Jiangsong. This time, the monk didn't roll up his sleeves, so no one

could confirm whether he bore the same tattoos, but he, too, took a child from the mountain and left.

Of course, these rumors were unverifiable and never spread far. Now, only people in this temple, which overlooked Daze Temple, really mentioned them. The young novice remembered his senior brother chuckling as he recounted:

"Master once told me the wildest rumor: It claimed that the boy from the southern border was the white-robed monk, and that white-robed monk eventually became the state preceptor."

"Then what happened to the abandoned infant and the other child?" the novice asked.

His shixiong scoffed. "You actually believe that? How would I know?"

So, in the novice's mind, that lonely ghost temple became something shrouded in myth, mysterious and unpredictable. It was a place where anything could happen.

"Stop daydreaming," his senior brother scolded. "This rain is really coming down. I heard this morning that the county river has already overflowed. If this keeps up, it'll be up to our ankles. If you leave that window open, this room will be flooded before you know it."

The novice nodded and reached for the window frame. Just as he was about to pull it shut, his gaze flicked upward—and his hand froze.

"Shixiong…"

"What now? You can't even close a window properly?" Exasperated, his senior brother moved to help, only to see the novice pointing at the dark clouds, murmuring in disbelief, "I think…I saw a dragon…"

His senior brother was about to knock him on the head for his nonsense when a long shadow draped in pale lightning flashed through the clouds. Its form was indistinct, but its shape was unmistakable, and the novice was right. It looked exactly like a dragon!

"Heavens!" his senior brother gasped.

The novice pointed at Mount Jiangsong, his face slack with shock. "I-it's heading straight for Daze Temple!"

Meanwhile, inside that very temple atop Mount Jiangsong, the grand procession of the state preceptor's ritualists waited in the main hall.

The ancient fire hadn't burned for long, but because Daze Temple was remote and received few worshippers, it had only housed a handful of monks to begin with. No one had escaped because the lightning strike had come at night, but in truth, the fire had only ravaged the rear sections of the temple, leaving the front halls relatively intact.

Following the state preceptor's instructions, the chief diviner and the chief ritualist had led a hundred-odd acolytes into the hall, where they now sat in opposing semicircles. The chief diviner was at the head, while the chief ritualist was at the rear. A small stone effigy carved with runes rested at the circle's center, its surface covered top to bottom with complex yellow paper talismans. Its base was encircled by a line of blood.

The chief diviner instructed each acolyte to prick their thumb and draw a drop of blood. Bright red beads oozed from the tiny wounds, and just as they were about to fall, a soft sigh echoed through the hall—so faint that it was swallowed by the crying wind outside. Only the chief diviner paused; no one else even reacted.

Frowning, she scanned the room warily before remembering that they had thoroughly searched the hall upon arrival. There was no way an outsider could have been hiding here.

Did I mishear?

The chief diviner shook her head to clear the thought and returned to the task at hand. With a final instruction to the group, she pressed her bloodied thumb onto the ground in front of her. The hundred-odd acolytes and the chief ritualist did the same.

At once, hair-thin threads of blood began to spread from where their thumbs had touched the ground, slithering like living creatures toward the stone effigy at the center. Everyone closed their eyes and began to chant in low, murmuring voices. The droning hum spilled out from the hall, only to be swallowed instantly by the relentless downpour outside.

At Mount Wanshi and Lake Dongting, the other groups from the Court of Imperial Sacrifices were doing the same: sitting in circles around

stone effigies the state preceptor had placed there earlier, pressing their bleeding thumbs to the ground.

At the foot of Mount Jiangsong, upon which Daze Temple stood, there was a forest of tall stone peaks called Heishi Shore, and beyond that lay the expanse of the river.

Currently, Heishi Shore was scattered with almost two hundred people, all lying motionless. A quick glance revealed their pale, bloodless faces, closed eyes, and faint frowns. All of them were unconscious. At first sight, they looked like corpses, though their bodies had yet to stiffen.

Judging by their clothes and the objects they wore and carried—mostly tattered rags, worn-out coats, and threadbare garments that reeked with a sour stench—most were either beggars or refugees who'd fled their homes due to famine. Even those whose garments were whole were not wearing anything of quality. The calluses and cracks on their hands, along with their dry, darkened skin from years under the sun, betrayed their impoverished origins.

Still, mixed among them were a handful who seemed a little better off—travelers or lone wanderers who'd been captured and brought here. Among these were Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi, who'd been waiting at the teahouse.

Had they been awake, they would have been terrified by the scene before them. Nearly two hundred people were arranged in concentric circles to form a massive human array. At its center stood a stone statue, crudely carved into the life-sized likeness of a monk standing on a lotus pedestal. From the rear, the monk's billowing robes lent it the serene aura of a stone Buddha, but from the front, its solemn face was hidden by an eerie, bestial mask. There was something malevolent about its appearance.

Even more unsettling were the intricate runes carved into the robes of the statue. At a glance, they matched those on the smaller stone effigies at Daze Temple, Mount Wanshi, and Lake Dongting. The sole difference was the archaic characters interspersed among the runes of the statue. Some kind of tribal script, perhaps.

Had Xue Xian been present, he'd have recognized that these characters originated from the same source as those on the walls of Baichong Cave. The differences between them were minimal, limited to

subtle stroke variations so slight that even the writer might have failed to notice if distracted.

The lotus pedestal was plastered with yellow paper talismans, and beneath it, a line of blood also encircled its base.

Nearly two hundred people had been arranged with their heads facing the statue and their feet pointing outward. Despite their varied appearances and backgrounds, they shared one striking similarity: a bloodred dot between their brows that resembled a crimson mole.

The river winds whipped and waves slammed ashore, one after another. Combined with the unceasing rain, it seemed like it would only be a matter of time before the waters swelled high enough to swallow Mount Jiangsong whole.

Yet the human array seemed to form an impenetrable barrier. Though the gales were fierce enough to cut flesh and cloth, the talismans on the lotus pedestal remained still. The rain poured, raising the river until it lapped at the shore, but not a single drop touched the robes of those lying within the array.

Outside the array, a company of gray-clad people knelt on one knee. They all wore masks that resembled those of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, except where the court's were mostly crimson, these masks were dark green, as if playing yin to their yang, shadow to their light. Each wore a peachwood pendant at their waist, identical to the one carried by the man who'd hidden beneath Xuanmin's bamboo pagoda.

"One hundred and eighty people who match the birth charts exactly. No more, no less. Ninety yin, ninety yang," the leader of the gray-clad group announced. His voice, muffled by the mask and dispersed by the heavy rain, was muted and indistinct.

The man that the group was kneeling before stood between two black stone peaks, facing Mount Jiangsong with his hands clasped behind his back. He wore pristine white monk robes, untouched by dust. The pouring rain seemed to vanish mere inches from him; it left not a trace of moisture on his robes. Tall and slender, his upright posture exuded an otherworldly aura, one that made people balk at studying him too hard or approaching him.

His face was concealed behind a silver mask, revealing only a pair of midnight-black eyes, and his head was tilted upward, his gaze locked on the summit of Mount Jiangsong. Though his expression appeared calm and indifferent, there was a hint of something else beneath the surface. Upon hearing the leader's report, he rubbed his clasped fingers together, but his gaze remained unmoving.

The gray-clad leader looked up and then quickly bowed their head in fear as they awaited the white-robed monk's command. The monk's slight pause made the gray-clad group anxious, as if they might have made countless blunders or committed an unforgivable misstep somewhere.

But when the monk did speak, he sounded indifferent. "Did you disturb any unrelated civilians?" His voice carried a natural chill, like water when it was just freezing over.

At this simple question, the gray-clad group trembled slightly.

"No, no!" their leader hurried to say. "We only targeted remote areas. If there were any bystanders, we took them along as well, leaving no loose ends."

The monk rubbed his fingers together again. "You *took* people?"

"Ah, no. Invited them," the leader corrected.

There was another long silence after this hasty amendment. Unable to resist, the leader peeked up and saw that the white-robed monk was still watching the summit of Mount Jiangsong. Though his eyes were not visible, the leader sensed a rare hint of emotion in the monk, as if this remote and nameless mountain held some inexplicable connection to him.

Stunned by this realization, the leader found the courage to ask, "This place is remote and little known. Why did you choose it, State Preceptor?"

As soon as the words were out, the leader wanted to slap himself to death right there. He had been raised and taught by the sorcerer Songyun since he was sixteen, and he had been helping Songyun and the state preceptor with certain issues for seven or eight years now. However, he could count on his fingers the number of times he'd actually seen the state preceptor. He mostly took his orders from Songyun, then traveled throughout the land performing his assigned tasks. Despite their limited interactions, he knew the state preceptor's personality—he was a

temperamental man, with a strong dislike for subordinates who overstepped their bounds and asked inappropriate questions.

What constituted an “inappropriate question”? The state preceptor had never explicitly stated. But as far as the leader understood, it meant: *Don’t ask anything at all.* The state preceptor had his reasons for every arrangement he made. How could anyone dare to question them?

To the leader’s surprise, the state preceptor didn’t grow angry, and he actually answered.

“Many years ago, I met an eminent person here.”

That was…so very long ago. So long that even he could no longer remember how old he’d been, what he’d looked like, who his parents had been, or why they’d abandoned him in this remote mountain. If not for that eminent person, he might have already cycled through several reincarnations. How could he have attained all he had today?

The gray-clad group’s leader was momentarily stunned by this answer, then he dropped his head back down. “That eminent person must have had keen insight. Otherwise, how would we have the peace and prosperity of today?”

“Keen insight…” The state preceptor seemed to find the phrase amusing, or perhaps he was mocking him. “Peace? If there were true peace, I wouldn’t have to go through so much trouble. I wouldn’t be standing here today, nor would I have to ‘invite’ so many suffering commoners to join us.”

The leader didn’t know how to respond. The state preceptor was usually so reticent—wouldn’t it be *more* awkward if he didn’t seize this rare opportunity to speak? After a moment’s thought, he ventured: “We are too foolish to share your burdens.”

The state preceptor’s gaze swept over them, then returned to Mount Jiangsong.

“There will always be a use for you. No need for undue humility.”

As the monk looked at the abandoned temple atop the mountain, he suddenly raised his hands in a Buddhist salute. For him, this life had begun here, so it was only fitting that it should also end here. That would make for

a proper cycle. Moreover, what he was planning contradicted the original intentions of that noble person from the past. Thus, offering a moment of repentance before death would bring him some peace of mind. He believed that if that person were still alive, they would understand his painstaking efforts.

When he raised his eyes, the talismans on the pedestal of the stone statue in the center of the human array rustled.

One talisman faced Daze Temple, another Lake Dongting, and the last Mount Wanshi. The three talismans trembled simultaneously, emitting a sound like war banners flapping violently in the wind.

Immediately after, the blood circle beneath the lotus pedestal glowed. The dried blood abruptly turned fresh again, so much so that it seemed to run slightly.

The state preceptor turned and swept his sleeve. A sound like slashing blades rushed over the array, and in an instant, the left thumb of each person placed in it split open. Crimson blood flowed from their wounds, dripping onto the ground to wind unnaturally toward the stone statue, drawn by some invisible force. Hundreds of blood threads slithered like serpents toward the statue, merging into its base in the blink of an eye. It was a horrifying sight.

Though the gray-clad group had been prepared, witnessing this still left them cold with dread. They stared as the lotus pedestal was stained a dark red, until the blood seemed to come alive. It climbed up the stone as if intent on dyeing the entire statue crimson.

How much blood would that take? The gray-clad group didn’t know. They only knew that every last drop would be drained from the people in the array. Not a single one would survive.

They were still lost in shock when the state preceptor shot them a cold look and waved his sleeve again, sending out another blade of wind. The gray-clad group felt a sharp pain in their left thumbs. Before they could react, an immense force slammed their left hands to the ground. The force was so overwhelming that resistance was impossible. The group was thrown onto their stomachs, and they could do nothing but watch helplessly as their blood gushed from their fingers and flowed toward the stone statue—as if it were life itself being drained away.

For a moment, they were frozen; then they began to struggle wildly. Yet no matter how much strength they mustered or what methods they tried, their left hands remained pinned to the ground, unmoving, as their blood continued to flow.

A realization hit the leader of the gray-clad group, who stared up in horror at the state preceptor—just in time to meet his downward gaze.

Those pitch-black eyes held no ripple of emotion, as if what he looked upon were not living people at all, merely the grass and trees of the world.

Through that utter calmness, the leader understood the deeper meaning behind the state preceptor's earlier words: "*There will always be a use for you.* No need for undue humility."

That was why the state preceptor had been so uncharacteristically talkative just now. In his eyes, he'd only been speaking to himself. No one would hear it. After all, the dead were no more than bones—they no longer counted as people.

As the leader's blood slowly drained away, it seemed to take all the warmth from his body with it. He grew cold, his vision blurred, his mind fogged, and his neck could no longer support the weight of his head. In the midst of his bewildered terror, countless fragmented and scattered memories surfaced in his mind.

He remembered the people he had grown up with in the mountains, now lying in this sea of blood alongside him.

He remembered the first time he'd seen the state preceptor. Back then, he was just a child, ignorant of the world. He caught a glimpse of the state preceptor once while sneaking down the mountain behind Songyun's

back to watch the imperial procession pass through their county town. So many people had come, yet none dared to get too close. As he squeezed through the crowd to find a better vantage point, someone elbowed him, and he stumbled toward the procession.

Just as he was about to fall, he'd felt something like a gust of snowy wind brush past him, light and effortless. It steadied him just enough to keep him upright. Too young to understand what had just happened, he blinked in confusion and found himself standing safely at the roadside. When he looked up in astonishment, the procession had already moved ahead, yet he still caught a clear glimpse of the white-robed monk astride a tall horse…

That memory was so distant, he'd thought it long forgotten. But at this moment, it resurfaced.

He hadn't feared the state preceptor as he did now when he was a child. He had revered him. When had that changed? When had every encounter with the state preceptor become filled with nothing but terror?

Following Songyun's orders, he and his brothers had toiled in the shadows for years. How many missions had they carried out? He could no longer remember. When he first watched lives end at his hands, he'd been racked with guilt and panic. He'd even questioned Songyun, seeking the reason for it all.

Songyun had said that everything they did was for the sake of the common people. Every small preparation was part of a large-scale array: "Bones Beneath the Land." If completed, it would not only avert the great calamity they had foreseen but ensure centuries of peace for the land.

These matters were far too profound, and Songyun had never taught him the intricacies of such a vast array. He only remembered one phrase Songyun had repeated endlessly since his childhood: *"Achieving great things always requires sacrifice."*

He'd understood those words and carried them with him for many years, until today. Until he watched his own blood spill, the gap between life and death narrowing to a mere blink. Only then did a great fear grip him, and he was plunged into panicked confusion. Those words were wrong, weren't they? They were missing something. At the very least, they should have asked if those people were willing to be sacrificed.

After another futile struggle against death, his fading mind wavered. Perhaps those words weren't entirely wrong. But…

He wasn't so sure. Was the indifferent state preceptor truly acting for the sake of the people? Were the deaths of the hundred-plus people lying here, and the bones buried beneath the river, and all the others dragged into this truly necessary? Was it truly unavoidable?

He no longer had the strength to voice these questions; he couldn't even muster the energy to look at the state preceptor one last time. In the deepening darkness, he slowly drifted into sleep…and most likely, he would never wake again.

The blood flowing from the fingers of the gathered people finally colored the entire stone statue a dark crimson. Its otherworldly form had been replaced by an overwhelming malevolence.

It seemed a sinister ritual had finally begun. The entirety of Mount Jiangsong—along with Heishi Shore, where the state preceptor stood—began to rumble. The river surged and water slammed toward the shore, only to halt behind the state preceptor and recede. It almost looked as if there were two opposing forces, locked in a fierce struggle.

The state preceptor sat cross-legged on the ground, palms pressed together as he murmured scriptures under his breath. An outsider might have thought he was performing rites for the dead, yet within the ancient cadence of the chant he uttered were discordant notes that grated on the ear. Behind him, black stones toppled; before him, raging waves surged. The wind and rain arched over him, forming a protective dome that left him untouched.

At first, there was no visible change. But when he finished a line of the scripture, dots of blood sprouted over his clasped fingertips. There were at least a hundred of those unsettling spots in total.

He continued chanting without acknowledging the spots.

They seemed alive. With each solemn verse, they crept up the back of his hands, though their movement was agonizingly slow. The state preceptor's face was obscured by his silver mask, but a thin film of sweat soon beaded at his temples beneath the mask's edge, where it was pressed to his skin. His voice remained steady, but he was exerting immense effort.

The spots of blood crawled from his hands to his forearms and disappeared into the wide sleeves of his robe.

The tempestuous storm grew ever fiercer, threatening to engulf everything in its wake. The small building on the distant riverbank was pounded by the furious waves, shaking violently until it finally succumbed. With a cacophony of splintering sounds, it toppled and plunged into the river in another colossal wave.

At the same time, a brilliant golden thread—like a streak of lightning—raced along the opposite riverbank. With the speed of rolling thunder, it shot northeast. After passing a certain point in the river, it emitted a sharp crack, then veered southwest, straight toward Heishi Shore.

Just as it passed Lake Dongting and Mount Wanshi, making a beeline for Daze Temple, a faint golden light began to emanate from beneath the state preceptor. The spots of blood had already traveled up his arms and neck to bloom upon his throat.

It was a horrible thing—the ethereal monk, his neck and shoulders erupting with crimson spots. Spurred on by his relentless chanting, the spots continued to push upward, toward his face.

The moment the spots reached his chin, a bloody circle appeared on Heishi Shore. There was a flash of red light, then two figures materialized within the circle.

One of them was attired in white-hemp monk robes. His face was striking; there was an unearthly beauty to him but also a frigid chill. It was a cold that made the heart seize, like it was at the edge of a bottomless abyss that had lain dormant beneath centuries of ice and snow. His hand was unceremoniously gripping the other man’s collar.

That other man was covered in blood, his once gray-blue robes tattered and caked with mud. Scratches covered his arms, neck, and face, as if a thousand ants had been gnawing on him, and driven to madness by the unbearable itch, he’d clawed himself into a gruesome mess.

This bloodied man was the sorcerer Songyun, who’d found himself trapped in the valley, and the one gripping his collar was Xuanmin.

His expression was as cold as ever, but his dark eyes threatened an impending storm, and anyone who met his gaze would have been struck

with an inexplicable fear.

When Songyun landed and saw the state preceptor with his palms pressed together, his face first filled with confusion, before that was replaced by alarm.

“You’re not—you—!”

Songyun jerked violently, trying to struggle free from Xuanmin’s grip. Xuanmin shifted his hand from the man’s collar to clamp around his throat instead.

Songyun had already been weakened by his ordeal in Baichong Cave; otherwise he would have put up more of a struggle and avoided his current wretched state. With Xuanmin’s hand around his throat, his words came out slurred and strained.

“Y-you, you’re another—*ah*!”

Before he could finish, Xuanmin’s grip tightened. It wasn’t in reaction to Songyun’s words, but because Xuanmin had finished taking in everything: the storm, the human array on Heishi Shore, and the spots of blood crawling up the state preceptor’s neck.

Earlier, in the valley, the seal on the fourth copper coin had lifted, unlocking another fragment of Xuanmin’s memories. These scattered recollections were tumultuous, like remnants of another lifetime, and far beyond what most could process immediately.

Even before these memories returned, Xuanmin had already sensed that his connection to Xue Xian was no simple one. He even suspected that the person he’d been searching for all along might have been Xue Xian.

Yet intuition was only intuition. A sliver of doubt had remained within him. Still, as his memories unveiled the moment he’d calculated the dragon’s tribulation, he felt as though he’d been cast into darkness—hemmed in by towering cliffs, no sky in sight.

His sin of stealing Xue Xian’s bones loomed there, plain to see. It was a chasm that no words could mend. So Xue Xian had left without looking back, and Xuanmin couldn’t follow. All he could do was watch as that long shadow vanished into the clouds. Gone without a trace, never to be seen again.

Perhaps they would never meet again in this lifetime.

But regardless of whether Xue Xian wished to see him, Xuanmin would repay his debt. He'd captured Songyun and drawn an array, transporting himself to where the dragon bones were buried. No matter his original intentions, he would make amends in full. Bone for bone. If he'd caused the tribulation, he would quell it. If he'd taken others' lives, he would return them.

However, when he actually arrived on Heishi Shore, what he saw was far from what he had expected. The silver-masked monk with his clasped hands was someone he recognized from his memories.

In his childhood, this monk had punished Xuanmin by forcing him to transcribe scriptures in the snow. Yet, the same monk had also taken him inside and warmed his blankets with a copper brazier while sharing his worldly wisdom. The monk had watched Xuanmin settle into bed, then gently closed the door upon leaving.

Long ago, he had called this monk "Shifu"—a title he hadn't used in decades.

Xuanmin's grasp of events was still incomplete. He only remembered that many, many years past, he had first called the monk that title.

The other man had given a long pause, then offered a cold, indifferent wave of his hand.

"*This is but a meeting between old friends.* I dare not claim the title of Shifu."

For years, Xuanmin hadn't understood those words. Later, he had stopped thinking about them altogether. Now, though many of his memories had returned, few were related to the man in front of him. The instant he saw the monk, though, a complex emotion rose in his heart. Its origins were unclear, but it definitely wasn't the feeling a disciple should have upon seeing his master.

For a second, Xuanmin frowned. Then, suddenly, he understood—

Because around the monk who so closely resembled Xuanmin, a brilliant array had been arranged. Not to save lives or bring salvation, but to steal fortune and merit through a life-exchange ritual.

Xuanmin’s fingers tightened. Songyun’s eyes rolled back, and he lost consciousness.

With a flick of his wrist, Xuanmin tossed the limp man onto the stone shore and swept his sleeve outward. The rampaging waves heaved as blades of wind slammed into the array with a deafening crash. The invisible barrier shielding the array erupted in golden sparks. Xuanmin’s blow was so intense that even the solid stone peaks along the edges crumbled into dust. Under his onslaught, golden hairline fractures sprouted over the barrier. Those cracks spread outward rapidly. The barrier was on the verge of exploding—only to be suppressed at the last moment by another force.

Still seated on the Heishi Shore, the state preceptor briefly paused his chanting. He flipped his palms outward, pushing toward the array before snapping back.

During that pause, the spots creeping up his neck and chin also halted, only resuming their upward crawl when the chanting started anew.

This happened with lightning speed, but even faster was the relentless gale hammering the barrier. Suddenly, it changed directions and rushed straight at the state preceptor.

Clang!

A golden barrier materialized around the state preceptor, deflecting the incoming winds with a resonant chime. A massive force was driven straight into the river’s waves, where it struck the towering, oncoming tide and somehow reversed its direction. The water barreled toward the distant other bank with the power of a thousand galloping steeds.

Xuanmin flicked a copper coin and yanked his hand back. The full force of the surging waves became concentrated in his grip, the immense pull threatening to tear his arm from its socket. The agony was excruciating, but his expression remained unfazed.

He tightened his fingers and yanked backward, single-handedly pulling back that massive wave. At the same time, his assault on the array intensified. Raging gust after raging gust slammed into the circular formation, creating shockwaves that shattered the surrounding stone peaks into tumbling rubble.

As the attacks grew fiercer, the array's defenses began to falter, and the state preceptor's golden shield dimmed. The blades of wind slicing into it seemed on the verge of breaking through.

Just as the array's foundation was about to be compromised, the distant Mount Jiangsong—along with the mountain range beyond—began to shudder uneasily, as though this small array were tied to a much greater formation, and disturbing one part would affect the whole.

Xuanmin's brow creased. The fierce winds from the standoff whipped at his robes, but the storm and deluge outside the barrier still failed to reach this stretch of black-stone beach.

Just as he was about to flick the copper coin again, the state preceptor stopped chanting within the shield.

"Cease this futile struggle," he ordered. "This blood array is linked to another, more powerful array beneath the land. If you persist, those who gave the bones buried beneath these mountains and rivers will have died in vain."

When the mountains had stirred earlier, Xuanmin had glimpsed a faint thread hidden within their shadows, just like the so-called spider silk he'd seen converging from three sides on Mount Lianjiang. It was the connective thread between the arrays. A quick look at its path told Xuanmin that this was Bones Beneath the Land.

Chapter 37:
Buddha Bones

THERE WAS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT. The enormous array spanning the earth behind him was Bones Beneath the Land.

Xuanmin had yet to recall the finer details of the array, but he remembered its structure and the key points within. Though it was tremendous in scale, it followed the same rule as all smaller arrays: A spiritual object was needed to anchor it. Though the world held many such objects, those capable of anchoring an array of that size were exceedingly rare. There were no more than two.

Which the state preceptor had chosen was obvious.

Xuanmin's gaze swept over the mountain range. The brightest thread flickering faintly among the peaks could be traced to the foundation of this immense array and the dragon bones within.

The state preceptor had yet to finish when Xuanmin struck his coin again. A metallic clang rang out. Both the array and the shield buzzed like an angry wasp. The mask on the state preceptor's face split cleanly in two, clattering to the ground, and his long-closed eyes finally opened.

He and Xuanmin were both dressed in pristine white monk robes, their statures and auras strikingly similar. When their eyes met, a flicker of surprise passed through both of them before it vanished just as quickly.

In Xuanmin's fragmented memories, he had only seen his shifu without his mask once or twice as a very young child. Even within the secluded Tianji Institute, the man rarely revealed his face. Thus, Xuanmin's impression of his appearance had always been hazy.

Now, upon closer inspection, the man bore only a passing resemblance to what Xuanmin remembered. So many details were different.

Once the stunned silence passed, the seated state preceptor shook his head and let out a soft, mocking laugh.

Xuanmin's memories of him were vague, but the reverse was not true. After all, it was the state preceptor who had found and raised Xuanmin from childhood.

The name "Tongdeng" had been passed down through four generations—or perhaps one could say three. The man known as the state preceptor had been replaced again and again. Though the individuals weren't perfect copies, in their youth they used talismans and spiritual medicines to influence their appearances, ensuring some resemblance.

Most of the time, the state preceptor wore a mask, so few ever saw his true face. Those who did went many years without seeing him again, whereupon any subtle shifts in his appearance were dismissed as natural. Moreover, few dared to stare openly at the state preceptor's face—even when he wore his mask, most kept their gazes lowered in deference. Combined with the fact that each generation of state preceptors shared similar mannerisms and presence, that meant it was nearly impossible for outsiders to notice the substitutions.

It was the handover period between the two state preceptors that required the most prudence. By then, the previous one had aged, while the successor was still in his prime. Thus, when the older state preceptor reached middle age, he began using wax and skin masks to adjust his appearance. Similarly, the younger replacement, whose features still bore their youthful air, employed various methods to minimize the differences between them.

At first, it was the young Xuanmin who had followed the teachings and molded his appearance to match the state preceptor's. Later, after Xuanmin became the head, the dynamic reversed, and the state preceptor went to great lengths to make himself resemble Xuanmin.

Then many things happened between them, and their masks became permanent, something they could never remove. Now, as they confronted each other, they realized with a start that they'd grown unfamiliar with each other's true faces.

What a joke.

Xuanmin coldly watched the disgusting spots on the state preceptor's chin—the sign that he was absorbing the fortune and merit of over a hundred lives. Once these spots of blood converged at his brow, the array

would be awakened. And since it was tied to Bones Beneath the Land, its awakening would render the greater array irreversible.

When the state preceptor had paused his chanting earlier, the blood spots had stopped moving. But now that they had reached his face, they seemed to have gained a life of their own. They continued their upward crawl even without the chant.

Xuanmin struck with a toss of his sleeve, but the state preceptor was no longer playing the passive party. He leaped to his feet, his golden shield intact.

The moment they clashed, the array quaked. Towering waves surged toward Mount Jiangsong, engulfing Heishi Shore. For a time, everything around them rumbled.

Xuanmin did not have the upper hand. One of his copper coins was still sealed, and for some reason, every move he and the state preceptor made felt strangely linked. Not like a mind link, when he shared thoughts with Xue Xian, but in the way that every attack he landed on the state preceptor was subtly weakened. On top of that, Xuanmin had to constantly refocus on other places to prevent the rivers from overflowing and flooding the land.

But the state preceptor could do little to Xuanmin either. The two of them remained locked in a stalemate.

The copper coins in Xuanmin's hand grew hotter, the last sealed coin buzzing incessantly as if on the verge of melting. One more strike, and it might shatter entirely.

The spots of blood on the state preceptor's face had passed his philtrum; now they inched toward the space beneath his eyes. No amount of beauty could compensate for markings this sinister—his entire face had turned grotesque.

As they battled, Xuanmin kept his attention fixed on the spots. Their propagation was accelerating. Once they reached the upper half of the face, it was as though some barrier had been breached. Soon, they inched past his cheekbones…

Then his eyes. Then his brow.

Xuanmin’s coin suddenly pulsed, and the final seal shattered at the last possible moment. Its old, weathered surface fell away, revealing the coin’s gleaming body beneath.

An enormous flood of memories engulfed him.

In his mind, he’d returned to his childhood, once again copying scriptures in the hall. The low desk had been specially prepared for his height. He stood, brush in hand, his posture practiced. Despite his young age, he moved as though he had done this a thousand times before.

Back then, copying scriptures wasn’t to familiarize him with the texts or to calm his mind—he had always been cold and reticent by nature. It was to train his handwriting, ensuring it matched the script in the handwritten sutras.

The strangest thing was that, even without practice, his writing bore an 80 percent resemblance to the sutras. Puzzled by this oddity, he glanced at the state preceptor nearby after finishing a page.

“Shifu, who copied these scriptures?”

The state preceptor’s fingers paused on his copper coins. His expression was difficult to make out due to the dimness of the corner; Xuanmin had no idea what he was thinking. After a moment, he answered quietly, “Tongdeng.”

Xuanmin blinked. “Tongdeng?”

“Mm,” grunted the state preceptor, still focused on the coin. A glint of golden light flickered in his palm, brimming with spiritual energy.

Xuanmin didn’t understand. “Shifu transcribed them?”

The state preceptor didn’t look up. “I’ve told you many times—don’t call me Shifu.” He paused. “Those were transcribed by the previous Tongdeng.”

“The previous one?”

“The position of state preceptor is passed down through generations, but to the outside world, we remain the same man. So our Dharma name remains unchanged. It’s always Tongdeng. I am the third.” After another long silence, he said, “In the future, you will also be Tongdeng.”

Veiled by the shadows in the corner, his expression stayed murky and inscrutable.

Xuanmin was taken aback. Though naturally reserved, he was still young enough to feel curiosity. “Then…what was your original name?”

He had almost reflexively called the state preceptor “Shifu” again but managed to stop himself.

“Zuhong. Or perhaps something else. I’ve forgotten,” the state preceptor answered coolly.

Xuanmin also remembered the first time he’d called himself Tongdeng—he’d just turned nineteen, and his face still carried a trace of youthful innocence. He’d carefully applied a mask of fake skin to his cheeks, then covered it with a beast-patterned mask before leading a grand procession to Mount Tai.

From then on, his appearances as the state preceptor grew increasingly frequent, because Zuhong was starting to falter as his age caught up to him.

Amid the chaotic flood of memories, he caught glimpses of himself taking charge of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, the fragments tinged with the nostalgia of a distant dream. If Zuhong had never changed his ways, perhaps he would have remained that way until the end of his life.

Though Zuhong had never wanted to be called “Shifu,” Xuanmin had still cherished his master’s kindness. So, when Zuhong delayed his retirement and sought to re-engage with the Court of Imperial Sacrifices’ affairs, Xuanmin did not stop him. After all, Xuanmin had never been attached to the position of state preceptor. He preferred solitude in the mountains over the maneuvering within the imperial court. Despite presiding over the Court of Imperial Sacrifices for over a decade, he was content to return Tianji Institute to Zuhong and move to the bamboo pagoda in the valley.

He’d been born carrying Buddha bones within his body, and his spiritual aptitude surpassed Zuhong’s, so Zuhong still needed his help with certain matters. Even during his solitary days in the mountains, he remained connected to the court…until Zuhong asked him to calculate a dragon’s tribulation period.

“Why must we calculate this?” Xuanmin asked, frowning. He was atop the Stargazing Tower, having been summoned back to Tianji Institute.

Zuhong was standing by the round table. He’d changed his attire to avoid suspicion, in case he was seen together with Xuanmin.

“A few days ago, I foresaw that a great disaster will happen in three years,” Zuhong answered. “The dragon undergoing its tribulation is the likely catalyst. Calculating the period will allow us to prepare for it beforehand and prevent harm to the people.”

At the time, Xuanmin had found this a little strange. During his solitary days in the bamboo house, he’d vaguely sensed that something was amiss, but he lacked proof. Zuhong’s answer sounded reasonable, so after a brief hesitation, Xuanmin agreed.

Later, when Xuanmin discovered that the true dragon had been stripped of its bones on the day of its tribulation, the long-buried rift suddenly ruptured. His master’s early kindness was eroded away by countless fractures—some small, some huge—until every suspicious clue aligned, revealing a truth far more unimaginable than he had ever conceived. The souls and bones Zuhong had manipulated coiled like a whip, shattering every last illusion of peace.

Xuanmin was not one to hesitate. In his fury, he stormed into Tianji Institute, sealing Zuhong’s spiritual power and scattering his strength. But their shared connection from the Life-Sharing Spider meant that Xuanmin himself was damaged by Zuhong’s injuries, leading to his complete memory loss.

Just before his memories vanished, he’d hastily left himself a note and placed seals on his copper coins to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands.

Fragmented and scattered scenes from childhood to the present slotted into every empty place. It was as if he’d awakened from a long dream.

Xuanmin’s mind finally cleared, but the sight before him made his brow knit. Zuhong held the powerful Thunder-Calling Fan at his fingertips. He used it to summon dozens of heavenly lightning bolts from the sky.

However, instead of blasting Xuanmin into ashes, they formed a net above him and descended.

There was no dodging this lightning; it would force Xuanmin to the ground. And during the brief moment his memories had distracted him, Zuhong had already encircled him within another array. The array wasn't lethal—it was meant to puppet him. Once the lightning fell, it would erase his will, leaving him under Zuhong's control.

"How could I kill you?" Zuhong said calmly amid the gale. "As long as you listen—"

Just as the lightning pressed down from above and the array closed in from below, a long shadow pierced through the tumbling waves and swept Xuanmin away in the blink of an eye. Then, with a flick of the tail…

Zuhong was cut off mid-sentence and barely dodged the attack.

The next moment, hundreds of divine lightning bolts crashed down with earthshaking force.

"'Thunder-Calling Fan'?" a voice jeered. "What kind of trash is that?"

As the words fell, Xuanmin landed on Mount Jiangsong, while a black-robed figure descended on Heishi Shore amid the thunder, slamming a palm into the river's agitated waves. The tremendous force barreled toward Zuhong.

The divine lightning carved deep craters into the ground, and fissures emanated outward. Some lanced into the river, others into the mountains. From deep within the mountain came the harsh crack of splitting stone. The rumbles echoed for miles, terrifying all who heard.

When the tidal wave crashed ashore, it shattered part of the mountain, which sent boulders tumbling into the rain to raise a surge of mist in their wake.

As the wave receded, the crater left by the lightning was revealed. Zuhong sat cross-legged inside, palms pressed together, chanting scriptures in a low voice. The golden shield encircling him had been destroyed. His white hemp robes were torn and charred, stained with blood. It was a wretched sight.

He coughed violently as he chanted. Blood trickled out from the corner of his lips; clearly, he'd suffered grave injuries. Nevertheless, the red spots on his face still crept toward his brow. The completion of the array was imminent.

But Xue Xian's strike had slowed the spots' progress to their original agonizing pace.

After a few more coughs, Zuhong gave up on finishing the chant and opened his eyes. Strangely, even now, he showed no panic, like he still had a backup plan.

Most people might have hesitated at this point, wary of giving him an opening. Too bad he was up against Xue Xian.

Zuhong looked up. Beneath the dark clouds, a black-robed man stood tall, flickers of electricity still sparking at his feet. The flashes of thunder illuminated his pale skin and striking features, but his aura was dark and unruly. Even the curve of his lips carried a sinister edge.

Most importantly, deep within his pitch-black pupils, a faint red glimmered: a sign of qi deviation.

Whether mortal self-cultivators or divine beings of nature, all were susceptible to qi deviation. Perhaps they'd strayed down the wrong path during cultivation, inadvertently entered an array, ingested dangerous elixirs, or accumulated violent energy within their bodies for too long. When they reached a certain point, all they needed was a spark, and a qi deviation would be a blink away.

In any of these cases, they'd become terrifying the moment they entered qi deviation, for they'd lose the ability to control themselves.

The moment Zuhong met the black-robed man's gaze, a barrage of black lightning struck him.

Despite the bone-piercing agony Zuhong was in, he gritted his teeth and reinforced his vital meridians with spiritual energy.

Meanwhile, the black-robed man strode toward the crater through the lightning, an aura of malevolence around him. He looked down with cold indifference before tilting his head. A smirk curved his lips.

“So, you’re the one who stripped me of my bones?” After a pause, he crouched, watching the endless lightning pelt down with detached amusement. “Listen, I’m a merciful person. Even if we line up all the bones in your body, they won’t even be half as long as one of mine. Out of kindness, I’ll consider us even, bone for bone. Since you made me watch as you ripped out my bones, I’ll rip out yours while you enjoy the view…”

As he spoke, he raised a hand. The slender, pale fingers there looked too pristine to have ever drawn blood. With a slight curl of his fingers, he grasped at the air and gently pulled his hand back.

Zuhong groaned, his clasped hands trembling. His left hand rushed to clutch at his right wrist. He felt as though the black-robed man was reaching through his flesh to rip out the bones of his fingers. The agony of bone separating from flesh was unbearable.

In that moment, Zuhong decided to gamble. The black-robed man had saved Xuanmin at a critical moment—their relationship must not have been an ordinary one. The man couldn’t care less about his suffering, but Xuanmin’s? That was different. No one would ignore their companion’s pain. Even if he only hesitated for a second… As long as there was a sliver of a chance…

“His life and mine are bonded,” Zuhong rasped. “If I die, he won’t live long. As long as he lives, I cannot die. All pain inflicted on me is reflected onto him. Knowing this, will you still kill me?”

Meanwhile, atop Mount Jiangsong, Xuanmin clenched his right hand tightly. His face betrayed no expression. If Zuhong hadn’t known it for a fact, he’d never have guessed Xuanmin was enduring excruciating pain. Why did he choose to endure? Others might not have understood, but Zuhong knew Xuanmin’s nature well. He’d always known it so well.

Xuanmin’s calm facade, his lack of reaction in the face of such agony… All of it was so he wouldn’t disrupt the black-robed man as he exacted revenge. After all, grievances had to be settled personally. No one else had the right to interfere.

Xuanmin’s reaction confirmed Zuhong’s suspicion: Their relationship was far from ordinary. Zuhong grew even more confident that his gamble would succeed.

For some reason, the black-robed man only glanced indifferently at Mount Jiangsong. His eyes flickered for a few seconds with confusion, but then they chilled again. “Who is that? Should I know him?”

He looked back at Zuhong with a sneer.

On the mountain, Xuanmin stiffened. He stared at the place where the black-robed man stood, then lowered his gaze and closed his eyes.

After leaving the valley, Xue Xian had headed straight for Mount Jiangsong, guided only by Songyun’s words. He’d never experienced such an overwhelming grief before, bone-deep and inescapable. That sorrow fused with the grudge that hung over his bones, along with the rage that had built up in him over the past half year.

Those emotions churned within him, sending painful spasms through his heart. It was unbearable, far worse than even the lightning he had to endure during his tribulations. It pierced through his skin and bone, like it had torn open his lungs and heart. At last, even his mind grew hazy. A raging fire burned from his chest to his brain. When the flames subsided, all that remained was a hollow fog…

Qi deviations were but a single thought away.

He forgot what he’d experienced and whom he’d met. He only wished to release his fury.

Even when he’d glimpsed Xuanmin’s memories via the link through the coins, the clarity had been fleeting. Right after, his fury engulfed him once more.

His body had moved faster than his mind for a moment, and he’d swept Xuanmin to safety. When the fury reclaimed him, he’d carelessly tossed Xuanmin onto the peaks of Mount Jiangsong.

He heard Zuhong’s words, but in his maddened state, they meant nothing to him. He’d felt a jolt of confusion when he looked at Xuanmin, as if countless memories were rising inside him. None of them lingered, so he’d turned away.

Still, for some reason, when he went to rip out Zuhong’s bones a second time, he couldn’t help but glance at Mount Jiangsong again.

There, he saw Xuanmin standing with his head lowered. A wave of inexplicable sorrow surged within Xue Xian’s heart, as vast and turbulent as a river. It felt strange, like the emotion came from some unknown connection beyond his control.

Frustrated by the feeling, he turned his back on Xuanmin and summoned another barrage of divine lightning.

Zuhong was disheveled, his robes a mangled tapestry of reds and blacks. He was completely unrecognizable. Xue Xian stared at him for a moment, then glanced again at Xuanmin. This time, he saw the patches of crimson blooming on Xuanmin’s robes, the result of his link with Zuhong.

The sight was like a stab wound through Xue Xian, and the pain echoed right through his heart. Briefly, he went blank.

“Bald…donkey?” he murmured, uncertain.

Xuanmin’s eyes snapped open, his face as pale as his lips.

“Mm,” he replied.

He raised a hand to cast a cleansing spell, but it wasn’t enough to stop the blood pouring out of him. Right after it was cleansed, more spread anew.

Xue Xian’s lightning abruptly ceased. His mind was chaos, and his pupils wavered between black and red…

Taking advantage of his distraction, Zuhong quietly restarted his chanting. Just a little more. He could almost taste it.

The swarm of spots finally reached his brow and converged inward. The huge array seemed to respond; the stone statues shifted slightly.

The child arrays fueled by members of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices at Lake Dongting and Mount Wanshi also began to shake. The people by the arrays had long since fallen unconscious.

At Daze Temple atop Mount Jiangsong, the child array there quaked incessantly too, sending the acolytes sprawling everywhere. The chief diviner and chief ritualist were no exception.

The life-exchange array neared completion.

Within Daze Temple, a soft sigh echoed through the hall. The chief diviner's fingers twitched. Through her stupor, she seemed to hear the state preceptor's voice, though it also sounded a little different. The low, deep voice sighed softly.

"You reap what you sow."

Perhaps it was her final rally before death, but the chief diviner found the strength to open her eyes. As she observed the sea of blood around her, she suddenly seemed to understand something.

With great effort, she forced her stiff thumb to move. Using the last of her blood, she drew a mark across the trail of blood leading to the stone effigy.

In the language of arrays, this meant severance. The array's caretaker had reneged at the final, critical moment, and the entire blood array instantly descended into frenzied chaos.

At that moment, Lake Dongting, Mount Wanshi, and Mount Jiangsong all quaked as one.

Just before the spots on Zuhong's brow could fuse, they scattered. Startled, he hurriedly touched his brow. Before he could confirm anything, the stone statue at the array's center began to pale, its color fading.

More accurately, the blood it had completely drained was now being returned, drop by drop. Since the source and destination had inverted, the blood within the disrupted array flowed in reverse, seeping back into the fingers of the unconscious people.

The disorder within Daze Temple's child array was transmitted to the larger, overseeing array, Bones Beneath the Land. Xue Xian and Xuanmin felt the ground lurch beneath their feet. The depths of the rivers stirred, restless and hungering to break through.

In the blink of an eye, the signs of calamity arrived. A colossal, rumbling tremor spread across the land, and the river erupted in a violent frenzy, no longer contained. Massive waves crashed against the shore, one after another.

With the changes in the blood arrays, the mighty array that had promised to bring peace to the people reversed, transforming into a

calamity of horrific scale. Hundreds of miles of mountains groaned, while thousands of miles of rivers rose. Floods slammed into the long banks, houses teetered on the brink of collapse, mountains fractured and crumbled. The natural disaster descended upon many prefectures along the great river. The screams and wails of civilians in far-off counties echoed for miles. As towering waves threatened to swallow nearby villages whole, their shouts blurred into a single, desperate cry before the churning water crashed down.

The colossal array convulsed, and the land writhed in unrest. As its anchor, the dragon bones bore the brunt of the onslaught.

In that instant, Xue Xian felt as though jagged stones were grinding through his flesh and crushing his bones, even if the bones weren't actually in his spine.

With a deafening crack like a collapsing mountainside, something within Xue Xian's back snapped. The fine threads holding his vertebrae together gave way under the immense strain. It'd been too long since they'd been refined, and now they broke completely.

The sensation in his legs vanished, and it wasn't just his legs that suffered. All five of his senses were under assault. The sounds around him dissolved into a muffled hum, his vision swam, and his sense of touch dulled. He felt as though he had become one with the very mountains and rivers the great array sought to control. Their agony was his, and their convulsions echoed within his flesh.

All of this unfolded with blinding speed. There was no time to react. The world darkened, as if layer after layer of heavy thunderclouds were descending until they smothered the ground.

It wasn't the world that was fading—it was Xue Xian's sight. The instant this struck him, his only instinct was to turn his head, to cast one last glance at the white figure on Mount Jiangsong.

In that final glimpse, he saw the indistinct white form raise a hand. Then, golden light erupted, countless threads of light that radiated outward. One by one, they snared the shuddering mountains and grasped the raging waves…

Xuanmin stood there, his copper coins in hand. The flesh of his extended arm had already split from the strain, and his white robe was

soaked in blood, but he paid those no heed as he desperately contained the land's fury. His other hand clenched into a fist.

Boom—!

Something vast and immense rocked beneath the mountains.

The wind's screams grew fiercer as the earth bucked and heaved, and the waves stampeded like maddened horses. Xuanmin's hand tightened around the copper coin. The blood staining his robe spread, blooming into a single crimson mass.

Yet he seemed oblivious to this. He continued to squeeze his fingers into a fist.

Rumble!

After several strenuous attempts, something broke through the earth —a long section of a spinal cord. With its spiritual anchor gone, the entire array succumbed to chaos.

Only a handful of spiritual artifacts were capable of quelling an array of such scale. In fact, there were only two in the entire world.

Zuhong had chosen dragon bones, so Xuanmin chose Buddha bones.

With a shudder, two bloodied bones materialized from his waist. Though his flesh remained intact, the moment the Buddha bones left his body, Xuanmin's vitality began to drain at an alarming speed. His face turned as pale as paper, though his eyes remained deep and dark as ink.

The copper coins spun between his fingers, and the mountains parted beneath him. The ground split open with a thunderous crack, revealing a yawning abyss. The two Buddha bones were cast into its depths, and with a deafening rumble, the ground closed once more.

Veins burst from the blood mole on Xuanmin's neck like a dying spider stretching its legs. Then, it slowly curled them back in.

As the blood mole dimmed, Zuhong lost his last tether to life. He remained seated with his legs crossed, but his face aged decades in seconds, and the light in his eyes—once so like Xuanmin's—faded, veiled in gray mist.

He'd struggled for years, but in the end, he couldn't escape death.

During a person’s final moments, they would recall many, many things, even things they believed to be long forgotten. His dimming eyes stared blankly at the sky, and something came back to him.

On Mount Jiangsong, when that eminent person had taken him in, the weather had been the same: looming black clouds, pouring rain, and raging winds that threatened to drown the mountains.

It was the first time he’d seen someone so transcendent, like they’d been bathed in the light of dawn.

Later, within the walls of the Tianji Institute, he’d learned that eminent person was the state preceptor. The position of state preceptor was passed down from one generation to the next. The first had hailed from the southern border, while that man was the second. And Zuhong, who’d been brought back to the Tianji Institute, was destined to become the third.

He’d called the state preceptor “Shifu,” though the man was always cold and taciturn. Throughout Zuhong’s life, he’d only had the chance to utter that title a few times.

The years from childhood to adulthood had felt both agonizingly long and fleeting. Long, because he could idle away hours lost in thought while reading scriptures, and time would seem to crawl. Fleeting, because the passage of decades left no trace on his master.

Much later, he’d learn that Buddha bones resided within his master’s body. They granted him a lifespan far longer than ordinary men, and he aged much more slowly as well.

Back then, all Zuhong had felt was reverence and a desire to be like his master. That emotion had faded after many years, because his master, who should have lived a long life, had perished in his twenties—all to save the common folk.

What good were Buddha bones? He’d died young anyway.

At the time, Zuhong couldn’t articulate whether he felt grief or something else. He only knew that sometimes, when he stood alone atop the Tianji Institute’s stargazing tower, the previous state preceptor would surface in his mind.

Later still, he found himself at the foot of Mount Jiangsong, where he brought back his own successor, another child with Buddha bones. Despite his young age, the boy bore an uncanny resemblance to Zuhong's long-dead master. He gave that child the original Dharma name of the second state preceptor: Xuanmin.

That faint sense of covetous reverence Zuhong had once felt resurfaced. At first, it was only a spark, but as Xuanmin grew older, the spark grew as well. During the ten-odd years when Xuanmin had been the state preceptor, he'd tried to suppress the feeling and convinced himself to stay away from the court.

He'd failed. When he realized that he was aging uncontrollably, that one day he would return to dust, that covetous feeling twisted into a burning envy.

Greed. Insatiable greed…

As the black clouds grew heavier, so too did Zuhong's eyelids. In his final moments of consciousness, he thought he saw a tidal wave crash down, and faintly, from somewhere, the sound of weeping.

This wasn't what he had intended. He'd only wanted to save lives while gaining something for himself. Somewhere along the way, greed had led him astray.

A dying man's words are often kind, as Confucius said. Perhaps his noble master's spirit guided him, allowing him to reclaim a sliver of his original heart in the end. The debts he owed, though, would have to be repaid in another form…

As his consciousness faded, Zuhong fumbled for his string of copper coins, smearing them with the blood from his face. Dim golden threads unfurled from the coins, tethering the water threatening the nearby village.

Xuanmin's Buddha bones had yet to fully stabilize the formation. The wind still cried as it whipped back and forth; the mountains still rumbled, groaning behind him. Countless screams and wails were shredded by the gale. The surging river was like a thousand white steeds, ready to leap into the sky—yet they failed to engulf the banks.

For the hundreds of miles of mountains and the thousand miles of river were held back by countless golden threads. At the other end of those

threads was Xuanmin, holding them in his grip as he knelt on one knee before Xue Xian.

The effects of his bones' ordeal had yet to fade from Xue Xian. He could neither see nor hear. His arms hung limply at his sides as he stood, motionless as a statue, his eyes vacant. His black robes were soaked, but not by the waves as it first seemed, for no waves could reach him. Rather, it was all cold sweat and blood, impossible to separate.

Xuanmin coughed weakly, but he never looked away from Xue Xian's face. His once-white monk robes were drenched in red, and his fingers had taken on a deathly pallor.

Slowly, he dispersed the spinal cord he'd reclaimed, then pressed it back into Xue Xian's body, bit by bit.

A faint glimmer danced in Xue Xian's sightless eyes.

Xuanmin covered them with his hand. After a long, silent look, he leaned in and kissed him.

The kiss was fleeting, light as morning mist, yet heavy as the mountains and rivers.

Xuanmin's coughing grew weaker, his hand still gently shielding Xue Xian's eyes, until the coughs faded entirely.

As Zuhong's life faded, his head slumped. Xuanmin's hand slid away, revealing Xue Xian's bloodshot eyes.

They were wide open, as if the slightest blink would send the tears pooling within to spill from their corners and down his cheeks.

Chapter 38:
Centuries of Peace

THE DISTINCT METALLIC TANG OF BLOOD clung to the air, carried by the riverside wind, past Xuanmin's hand to Xue Xian's nose. The churning river and quaking mountains reflected in his eyes, but his mind was blank.

Though his senses were slowly returning, he felt as if he were still blind and deaf. Otherwise, how could the ever-stoic Xuanmin, who rarely even nodded, bow his head so low it seemed he would never raise it again? Otherwise, how could they be kneeling face-to-face, drenched in blood, Xuanmin's hand still on his face, without saying a single word?

The power of the Buddha bones finally spread. The raging river calmed, and the trembling mountains stilled. The golden threads faded. Xuanmin's copper coins jingled twice in the wind before falling from his hand—landing precisely where he had drawn a small array in blood. The lifetime of spiritual power forged into those coins, combined with the Buddha bones, would indeed ensure a century of peace.

As the coins sank into the earth, a faint golden light rippled outward, spreading like gentle waves across hundreds, thousands of miles…

A soft breeze lifted the bloodstained hem of Xuanmin's robe, revealing a delicate porcelain vial, already opened, its contents long gone.

The golden light brushed Xue Xian, and a tiny red spider, no larger than a grain of rice, tumbled from the dragon's collarbone. As if its task were complete, it curled its legs and lay still.

Where it had sat, a pinprick-sized red mole now rested, subtly different from the one left by the Life-Sharing Spider. It was a little raised to the touch.

Xue Xian didn't notice. He was staring at Xuanmin, unwilling to believe what he saw.

Xuanmin's hand remained on Xue Xian's face, cold as the deepest winter, with not the faintest pulse beneath his skin. It was so still, Xue

Xian’s heart shook.

As his missing bones melded into his body, his blood began to burn. Intense heat and swelling raced up his spine, and it should have made him sweat profusely from the heat. He did sweat, but it was from the ice-cold fear in his heart.

The sensation of his spine reforming was an agony akin to being flayed alive, but he felt none of it. He noted neither his vitality nor his senses as they returned. He couldn’t even lift his hands.

After an eternity, he numbly reached up, gripped Xuanmin’s wrist, and clutched his slipping hand. The hotter his own hand burned, the colder Xuanmin’s felt.

“You…” Xue Xian’s voice was hoarse, barely a whisper as he choked on the word. His grip was too tight; when he pulled, Xuanmin pitched to the side.

Xuanmin’s body slumped over, and Xue Xian stiffly caught him.

Xuanmin’s chin rested on his shoulder, and one of his hands was clasped in Xue Xian’s, while the other was limp. From a distance, it might have looked like an embrace—save for the fact that one of them was already gone. The weight against Xue Xian made the unshed tears in his eyes quiver. He shut them tightly, forcing the moisture back.

Suddenly, his eyes flew open. Still holding Xuanmin, Xue Xian fumbled in his robes until he found a small white vial, identical to the one hidden in Xuanmin’s sleeve.

It was one of the pair of vials from Baichong Cave.

Xue Xian tipped out the mother and child spiders with shaking hands. After several tries, he pinched the mother between his fingers.

He thrust the mother spider to Xuanmin’s neck, almost crushing its abdomen to prevent any struggle or escape. He watched the mother spider writhe twice before it sank its fangs into Xuanmin’s neck.

He watched the spider bite without blinking, to the point his eyes ached, but the skin there showed no changes.

His entire body went rigid. Never before had he been so unwilling—so afraid, even—to think about something for a second longer.

The two figures, one black, one white, knelt amid the wreckage of Heishi Shore, clinging to each other for an immeasurable time. So long did they sit that the blood around the stone statue in the reversed array faded, and the crimson lines on the ground silently pulled back.

The two hundred unconscious people lying there no longer looked as pale as death. A faint flush returned to their faces. They bore only a tiny wound on their thumbs—far too minor to drain all their blood, had it not been for the influence of the blood array. Now that the array had reversed, everything had reset. Aside from that tiny cut and the few scattered drops of blood near their hands, they'd lost nothing else.

A long, long time passed. Even Xue Xian's feverishly warm body had cooled against Xuanmin's icy touch.

At last, a tiny red mole emerged on that patch of unresponsive skin. But the mole was faint. So faint, Xue Xian couldn't tell whether it was a sign of success or failure.

Just then, some kind of winged creature plunged from the sky. Xue Xian remained unresponsive until the dark shadow plopped down beside him. It flapped its wings and hopped closer to Xue Xian's hand, then dropped a dusty object from its beak to the ground. It pecked at his fingers twice, trying to draw his attention.

Xue Xian stayed in a daze for a while longer before he came to his senses. This was the bird Xuanmin had raised.

The bird was highly intelligent, almost approaching sapience. Despite the painstaking effort it must have taken to chase them here, it showed no sorrow for its lifeless master. Instead, it hopped about a few times, nuzzling Xuanmin's limp hand, then tilted its head to look at Xue Xian. It seemed it wasn't the first time it'd witnessed such a tragedy.

Xue Xian stared at the bird for a moment, then shifted his gaze to the object it had dropped. It was a dusty cloth pouch, and there seemed to be something inside. It'd made a faint clinking sound when it hit the ground.

When the bird saw that Xue Xian was still motionless, it let out a soft sigh and hopped over to the pouch. It pecked and tugged at the fabric until, at last, its contents came tumbling out.

Xue Xian froze—five copper coins.

Their patterns and engravings looked identical to the ones Xuanmin had once used, and even the spiritual energy they carried was nearly the same. Xue Xian didn't need to touch them to sense it. Stranger still, the coins' aura unmistakably belonged to Xuanmin himself. The only difference was the thin cord binding the coins. It gleamed as though unweathered—probably because of the spiritual energy—but Xue Xian could tell that the string of coins was hardly new. In fact, it had to have been over a century old.

The coins tumbled out of the pouch and rolled close to Xuanmin's limp hand, then emitted a faint hum, greeting their master after an eternity apart.

A flicker of awareness returned to Xue Xian's numb senses. The black bird's actions and the coins' reaction had jolted him back to his senses.

It seemed Xuanmin might truly open his eyes again.

He turned to examine the tiny mole on Xuanmin's neck once more. Perhaps it was his imagination, but the crimson mole no longer seemed quite so dull.

Maybe…it really had worked.

Xue Xian loosened his grip on Xuanmin's hand. Only when he flexed his fingers did he realize how hard he'd been clutching it. The sudden release sent dull aches through his knuckles.

He looped an arm around Xuanmin's back, ready to lift and carry him away from this place. But when he moved, something small tumbled from the folds of Xuanmin's sleeve, rolled over the back of his hand, and fell to the ground.

Xue Xian paused and frowned. After a brief search of the bloodstained shore, his eyes landed on a dark red spider, no larger than a grain of rice. The made his brows pinch together.

After his run-in with the Life-Sharing Spiders, Xue Xian had grown extra cautious around them. The moment he saw its round abdomen, his mind flashed to Baichong Cave.

Soon, he saw the association he'd made wasn't unfounded. When he picked up the stiff red spider and turned it over in his palm, he found it had a black underside with a thin red line running across it. However, this couldn't be a Life-Sharing Spider. The exoskeletons of the Life-Sharing Spiders changed color to blend into their surroundings. If this had been one, it would have gradually paled to match his skin tone, yet the spider remained unchanged.

How had a spider from Baichong Cave ended up here anyway? And why had it fallen from Xuanmin's sleeve? Had it been clinging to him?

Xue Xian froze. Suddenly, he recalled something in the cave—

Back then, Xuanmin had turned away to trap the Life-Sharing Spider, leaving Xue Xian to retrieve two porcelain vials from his robes. Xuanmin had kept a hand over his catch the entire time and never showed him what the spider looked like. Once Xue Xian found one of the vials, Xuanmin picked up a female spider from his palm and handed it to him before accepting the other vial.

At the time, Xue Xian had been too focused on sealing away the spider inside to pay attention to Xuanmin's actions. By the time he looked up, Xuanmin had already stoppered the second vial.

A fleeting doubt had crossed his mind then—why had Xuanmin needed to restopper the bottle when he'd never touched it? As Xue Xian recalled this, a suspicion took hold of him. Perhaps Xuanmin hadn't only captured the mother spider that day. There might have been something else, and that something had to be this scarlet spider.

And he was sure it wasn't the only spider. It must have been part of a pair.

Xuanmin *had* mentioned that Baichong Cave bred two types of spiders. Since this small spider wasn't a Life-Sharing Spider, it had to be the other one. But Xuanmin had never explained what the second type was or what purpose it served.

A little bewildered, Xue Xian pocketed the spider and studied Xuanmin's lifeless form in his arms. A fragile hope stirred in his chest—could these spiders have been Xuanmin's contingency plan? A safeguard?

Could it be…?

Xue Xian tightened his hold on Xuanmin and pressed his chin into the man's shoulder. His lips brushed against Xuanmin's icy neck, then the tip of his nose, before he finally buried his face in the hollow of Xuanmin's throat.

Daze Temple on Mount Jiangsong was a small, remote temple that had been founded over three hundred years ago. Because it'd been built during less prosperous times and had an isolated location, it never enjoyed great prosperity or attracted large numbers of worshippers. Its monks rarely numbered more than ten. Most had quiet dispositions and led peaceful lives.

About a hundred years later, right before the mountain temple had been burned by lightning, only five or six monks remained. They'd spent their entire lives there and lived to a ripe old age. The only youth present was a boy from the southern border.

Truth be told, the kindly old monks exchanged bemused glances when the boy arrived, thinking to themselves: *This child must be the fool of the century.* With so many renowned temples to choose from, why pick our Daze Temple?

That youth was blessed with striking features—high brows, refined features, and deep, clear eyes as dark as ink. Despite his young age, he exuded an air of serene composure. Any temple would have been happy to accept him based on these traits alone. Yet for some reason, his heart was set on the remote little temple nestled in Mount Jiangsong.

The elderly monks were delighted, but for the boy's own sake, they gently pressed him for a reason.

The youth simply replied, "Daze Temple has called me here."

Before he could take his vows, the temple that had supposedly called to him was struck by lightning and much of it was reduced to smoldering ruins. Every monk perished in the blaze—except for that boy from the southern border.

Years later, by chance, the youth befriended a kindred spirit around his own age. Decades after that, he would become the state preceptor, a guardian of the realm who warded off calamities and presided over the Court of Imperial Sacrifices.

This was because his dear friend happened to be someone rather special: a crown prince when they first met, and later, the emperor.

When the emperor's life neared its end, the grief-stricken state preceptor, unable to bear the loss, sought out methods to prolong his friend's life. Unfortunately, he was a step too late. By the time the ritual was ready, the emperor had already passed.

Bound by compassion and a promise to his friend to safeguard the empire for a hundred years, the state preceptor carried on. Yet a mortal's lifespan is ultimately finite. Worse, the toll of those life-extending rituals had left the state preceptor drained. The flame of his own life was flickering, on the verge of going out.

Thus, he divined the fates, then retrieved his successor from the ruins of Daze Temple on Mount Jiangsong.

His hope was to fulfill his old friend's dying wish: that no matter how dynasties rose and fell, there would always be an undying light to guide the way and bring peace to the land. Thus, the state preceptor took the Dharma name Tongdeng—*same light*, a title that would be passed down through generations.

But the successor he'd brought back to the Court of Imperial Sacrifices was still a toothless babe who couldn't speak. Bestowing such a weighty Dharma name on one so young risked crushing his fate. Besides, the time had not yet come for the state preceptor to retire. So for the boy's youth, he chose another name: Xuanmin—*profound compassion*.

Xuanmin was a rather special existence. He'd been born with a natural sarira[3] within his body, a phenomenon known as "Buddha bones." It was a manifestation of immense merit that would persist even through reincarnation. This made him the perfect successor.

Though in public the state preceptor was a man of few words, he spoke freely with Xuanmin. To the youth, he was both mentor and friend.

During Xuanmin's upbringing, few ever saw his face, either because the Tianji Institute forbade unauthorized persons from entry, or because the state preceptor had willed it so. Few knew of his existence in the first place.

Years later, Xuanmin came of age and assumed his position. With that, the previous state preceptor and the original Tongdeng, who'd long

had a foot in the grave, passed away.

His life had carried a touch of legend, yet in the end, it could be summed up simply: one kindred friend, one disciple. In all senses, it was a life well-lived. Nevertheless, one thing lingered in his heart—Daze Temple on Mount Jiangsong…

The lightning strike had been mere coincidence, wholly unrelated to him, but decades of being called a jinx had left him with a quiet, unshakable guilt around the temple. Even after death, it weighed on him. And so he remained at Daze Temple. Every winter solstice, every Tomb-Sweeping Day, every Ghost Festival, he would light lamps for the kindly old monks who'd once smiled at him centuries ago.

He existed as neither ghost nor spirit nor attachment; he was a little like all of them. No one could see him—not mystics, not masters of the occult, not even those who possessed eyes capable of seeing the supernatural. To outsiders, the long-abandoned Daze Temple seemed to flicker with ghostly lantern light every year—just enough to spook the locals into avoiding it entirely.

It was from this that its reputation as a haunted temple was born.

Today marked the twenty-seventh day of the twelfth month. The fierce battle at the foot of Mount Jiangsong felt like yesterday, though in truth, almost a month had passed. The wreckage below had long been cleared, and a year-end snowfall had buried the last remnants of the conflict, restoring an uneasy peace.

As night fell, pinpricks of light bloomed in the darkened ruins. There were six lanterns in total, glowing softly against the void.

"Look, Shixiong! The ghost lights are back!" The young novice perched at a distant temple window, craning his neck toward Mount Jiangsong while beckoning to his senior brother.

The ghost lights were unpredictable in their appearances, and sightings were rare. This was only the second time the novice had glimpsed them in over a decade at the temple.

Despite the eerie rumors that swirled about them, the sight itself incited little terror. The dancing lights cast a warm, golden glow that soothed rather than unsettled.

There was nothing sinister or eerie inside Daze Temple. Before the six “self-lighting” lanterns stood a white-robed monk, meticulously trimming their wicks. However, he was only visible to others like himself.

This was none other than the youth from the southern border, the lone child who had entered the temple so long ago: the first state preceptor, the true Tongdeng.

And there *was* someone like him, someone who could see him, within this abandoned temple. Neither ghost nor spirit, he also wore a long white robe. Currently, he was cross-legged on a reed cushion in the corner, his face pallid, his eyes lightly closed. It seemed he was meditating. Even in his current state, caught between ghost and man, his striking features and unyielding, icy demeanor remained unchanged.

It was Xuanmin.

Tongdeng serenely stood before the six peace lanterns, his hands clasped in a mudra. Then, with a whirl of his sleeves, he turned and walked over to Xuanmin. Under the light of the lanterns, he observed Xuanmin’s left hand, which rested atop his knee.

Nestled at the juncture of his pointer finger was a small, bloodred mole, no larger than a pinhead. The surface was a little raised, a perfect match for the one on Xue Xian’s collarbone.

“The mole’s showing,” Tongdeng said, withdrawing his gaze before giving Xuanmin another irritated look. “It’s a wonder you could think of such a trick amid that predicament. Letting out the spider, having it bite you, then bite him—that had to take at least a sentence’s worth of time. If you had the time for that, you should have put up more of a fight, maybe even managed a few dying words.”

Xuanmin’s eyes remained shut, and his lips didn’t even twitch. It was hard to tell whether he hadn’t heard him or was simply choosing to ignore him.

“They’re not as venomous as the Life-Sharing Spiders, but their bite is hardly pleasant. Did you develop a taste for them?” Tongdeng said sardonically after Xuanmin’s lack of response.

After a moment of silence, his eyes closed and face still blank, Xuanmin finally spoke.

“You are the one who raised them.” The unspoken message: *And you’re trying to warn others against getting bitten?* You sure have some gall.

Upon his body losing all vitality, Xuanmin had come to in the abandoned Daze Temple. His form had coalesced roughly two days prior and stabilized only last night.

During those two days, he couldn’t open his eyes or speak. All he could do was hear and listen to the nearby voice speak, recounting old matters as if reminiscing. Through the fragmented accounts, he learned this person was Tongdeng—the first state preceptor and his master in his previous life. Both of the spider breeds within Baichong Cave had been his creations.

Xuanmin had only tasted the Life-Sharing Spider’s effects. Years ago, before he’d left the Tianji Institute to live a solitary life in the bamboo pagoda, he’d noticed subtle changes concerning Zuhong’s lifespan. Though Zuhong never removed his mask even within the institute, Xuanmin had discerned his de-aging through the faint changes in the wrinkles on his neck.

Even then, Xuanmin had suspected that the transformation had something to do with himself. Zuhong’s words during that period always carried some deeper meaning—he spoke as if he owed Xuanmin, but also like he was a little grateful. At the time, his master’s kindness remained at the forefront of his mind, so even when he sensed something, he’d dismissed it.

It was only much later that he looked into the truth of the Life-Sharing Spiders. By then, Zuhong’s greed had escalated to stealing dragon bones, and Xuanmin’s own memory loss followed shortly after. Thus, the question of Zuhong planting a Life-Sharing Spider on him was simply put off, never to be addressed. Only on death’s door did he find the real answer.

Xuanmin had always been rigorously disciplined, leaving little leeway for others to exploit him. Looking back now, there had only been one occasion.

It’d happened the autumn before he left the institute and returned the state preceptor’s mantle to Zuhong. During meditation, he’d accidentally slipped into a frenzied Zen state. For three days and nights, he’d been in an

unconscious trance. His guard against Zuhong had been low then; it was possible the Life-Sharing Spider had been planted during that period.

Regardless, with his body now dead, that was all in the past. The spider with a hold on him now wasn't the Life-Sharing Spider but the other breed from Baichong Cave.

Back then, Tongdeng's true aim had been creating the Life-Sharing Spider. Breeding the other kind was purely an unintended consequence of his troubled mind. The emotions that spider contained were too complex, so Tongdeng didn't know what to name it. He had just called it the Nameless Spider.

Once, Xue Xian had offhandedly asked about their purpose, if they really bound people for three lifetimes like the legends said. Xuanmin had denied it.

He hadn't lied. The Nameless Spiders had nothing to do with one's next three lives. Where Life-Sharing Spiders were a mother-child pair, these came in pairs of fortune and misfortune: the red spider bestowed blessings, the black one curses. The tiny mole on Xuanmin's hand came from the black spider's bite, while the one on Xue Xian's collarbone stemmed from the red.

Once these blood moles formed, it meant that the black spider's victim—though dead—would neither decay nor dissipate; they'd continue to exist as something like a ghost or spirit. They would shoulder all calamities and suffering meant for their counterpart across infinite lifetimes, while bequeathing all their own destined fortunes to the other.

The price? To be excluded from the cycle of rebirth for all eternity.

So it wasn't for three lifetimes. It was forever.

"With the appearance of this mole, what lies ahead is a boundless loneliness. A never-ending existence," Tongdeng said. He stood in the doorway, eyes narrowed as he watched the moonlit heavens. Eventually, he turned back to Xuanmin. "There are benefits, certainly. You'll never lose your memory again. You will remember all that you should, with increasing clarity, as if it were yesterday. There are drawbacks, however. No matter how deeply rooted your memories, you will be invisible to all, even a dragon. So tell me, do you regret it?"

Xuanmin remained silent for a long moment, as if still unwilling to engage. This attitude mirrored their master-disciple dynamic from a century past.

Finally, Xuanmin countered with quiet precision: “You bear the mark from this spider as well. Do you regret it?”

Tongdeng made a noncommittal hum and said no more.

Regrets?

Life, death, fortune, and misfortune were not things to be dealt with lightly. He’d made his choice. Even if the Eastern Sea turned to dust and his bones to ash, he’d harbor neither bitterness nor regret.

ARC 6

HOMECOMING

Chapter 39:
Earthly Ties

ON THE SECOND FLOOR of the bamboo pagoda in Mount Boji was a small, bare room—so bare that it hardly seemed lived in at all. It held only a single bamboo bed, which appeared to have seen little use.

Truth be told, the entire chamber, though clearly intended as a bedroom, bore the air of a place rarely entered. One had to wonder about the kind of life its former occupant had led here. Did they not eat, drink, or sleep? Were they trying to ascend?

Regardless of how its master had once lived, he now lay upon his bamboo bed like any ordinary man.

Xuanmin was draped in a white robe, his face bloodless and pallid as ash. His hands were loosely folded over his chest, cold as ice and still. During the first two days, Xue Xian had fussed over him to no end. No matter what he tried, Xuanmin refused to warm. Xue Xian finally resorted to wreathing him in a cocoon of heated air that maintained a constant warmth. Later, still dissatisfied, Xue Xian went searching for something with which to cover him.

Xue Xian's rummaging through the bamboo house yielded nothing; he couldn't even find basic bedding. Ultimately, he made a trip to the nearby county town and used some silver to buy blankets and thicker robes.

Xue Xian had initially considered draping Xuanmin with his own outer robe. But the black garment he usually found pleasing looked jarring and wrong against Xuanmin's pallor. For the first time in his life, Xue Xian, who'd never cared for superstitions, found himself filled with aversion to the color black.

For two days, Xue Xian had run himself ragged. He'd draped the blankets over Xuanmin, then decided their clumsy bulk seemed off on top of him. Next, Xue Xian tried robes of different colors instead of black, but each looked more incongruent than the last. After an endless back-and-

forth, running here and there, he settled on covering Xuanmin with a spotless white robe.

Xue Xian still found Xuanmin's limp body unsettling. Seeing him lie motionless at all felt strange. In Xue Xian's memory, Xuanmin was either seated in meditation or up and calmly attending to important business.

Xue Xian sat for a while, until he just couldn't take it anymore and went to adjust Xuanmin's posture. Grabbing Xuanmin's arms, Xue Xian folded them over the monk's chest.

Once satisfied, Xue Xian made a solitary trip back to Baichong Cave. He traveled straight to the final chamber and meticulously made rubbings of every line of the strange script scrawled across its walls. However, the words meant nothing to him. Even with the replica in hand, he was no closer to a solution.

Xue Xian once again found Old Qu in the village beyond the mountains, hoping he could decipher them. Unfortunately, Old Qu couldn't read them either. He only said that the characters resembled an archaic script once used by his ancestors. He'd seen his elders write a few lines with them in his youth, but the script had fallen out of use a century ago, and those who understood it had long since returned to the earth. So the rubbings, too, proved to be useless. Xue Xian could only put them aside, feeling helpless.

He busied himself with numerous insignificant tasks. He spent his days bustling around Xuanmin because he was afraid to become stationary. The moment he quieted down, he would feel just how hollow Xuanmin's body was, completely devoid of spirit.

Xue Xian's vision was extraordinary—he could see both the living and the dead. He'd seen the specters of Jiang Shining, Old Lady Liu, and the wounded soldiers within the military tags. He could discern countless things: living people, the spirits of the dead. Yet he couldn't see anything beyond Xuanmin's flesh body.

There was only so much busywork Xue Xian could do. After three or four days of relentless activity, he finally, inevitably, stalled. Once he did, he sat motionlessly by the window frame. He watched Xuanmin for days on end. Sometimes, he simply observed, searching for the slightest change, the faintest flicker of movement. Other times, he just stared, lost in thought.

The mark left by the Life-Sharing Spider in the hollow of his neck remained dull, like a speck of long-dried blood. There was no telling when, or if, it would ever brighten again.

Xue Xian had spent centuries alone. He should have long grown accustomed to undisturbed solitude. Somehow, with Xuanmin lying there—eyes closed, silent, not breathing—Xue Xian felt an emptiness greater than any he had known before.

Fortunately, he soon found another task to occupy himself with. This time, it wasn't something so trivial as adjusting robes or rearranging limbs.

He discovered an old book within the bamboo pagoda's library. It appeared to be one that someone had personally written and bound. It'd been left for far too long in the cabinet, surrounded by mountain air thick with humidity. Across the long years while the place had been uninhabited, the pages had curled and warped, leaving its ink faded in places. Its pages were brittle, so much so that the slightest mishandling might reduce them to dust.

None of this dampened Xue Xian's eagerness as he turned the pages. At least half of its contents were incomprehensible to him, but what he *could* understand matched the cryptic runes etched on the cavern walls, while other parts actually explained the runes' meanings using ordinary characters. The contents were remarkably detailed. Clearly, the writer had been stolid and steady in personality, as well as very patient.

Xue Xian hurried to the last page. Sure enough, he found the signature he'd anticipated: *Tongdeng*.

During Xue Xian's qi deviation on Mount Jiangsong, the connection forged through the copper coins had allowed him to glimpse fragments of Xuanmin's restored memories. After Xue Xian's mind cleared, he'd pieced together the origins and legacy behind the state preceptor known as Tongdeng.

Based on this information, the Tongdeng who'd created the Life-Sharing Spiders in Baichong Cave and the Tongdeng who'd penned this book were one and the same—the very first.

Xue Xian had never met that Tongdeng, but judging by this book, he couldn't have been a wicked man. He seemed a devoted teacher.

After finding the book, Xue Xian wasted no time. He retrieved the rubbing of the cave's inscriptions and cross-referenced it with the book, annotating each character line by line. For four sleepless days, he labored until the meaning of every mark on the page became crystal clear.

Then, he sat silently at the desk for an entire night, unmoving.

Someone had decided to shoulder the misfortunes Xue Xian had suffered across lifetimes. All without asking for anything in return—not even acknowledgment. Had Xue Xian not deciphered those cave writings, he might never have known what Xuanmin had done for him.

How could he possibly abandon such a person now?

Even if Xuanmin had entered the cycle of rebirth, Xue Xian would have been able to find him. And since he hadn't, that made it easier. No matter where Xuanmin was, Xue Xian was going to drag him back.

Outside, snow began to fall across the vast wilderness. They were not biting, frigid flakes but thick and fresh, large and unblemished, carrying an almost tender warmth.

"New Year's Eve already," Tongdeng remarked, hands clasped behind his back as he gazed up at the heavy snow drifting down from the heavens. Suddenly, he blinked. "My memory fails me. What year is this again?"

Xuanmin remained inside, still recuperating. The toll he'd suffered was too severe for a quick recovery; at the very least, he couldn't yet manipulate objects as effortlessly as Tongdeng. Though he appeared to be sitting atop the reed cushion, in reality, he was hovering a little above it. Even if something as light as a needle were placed in his palm, it would slip right through and fall to the ground.

At Tongdeng's question, Xuanmin answered without opening his eyes: "The twenty-third year of Tianxi. After tonight, it will be the twenty-fourth."

Tongdeng's dark irises reflected the swirling snow, his eyes like an unfathomable lake. It seemed like the centuries had passed by in the span of a blink. After a long silence, he murmured, "Ah, Tianxi…"

His tone hinted that there was something else he wished to say, but he fell quiet again. Whether lost in thought or simply marveling at the swift passage of time, he said no more.

“This snow will last all night—a good omen,” Tongdeng finally said.

He turned to go back inside and tease his disciple, but before he could take a step, the low rumble of thunder echoed from the skies above.

The thunder came without warning, abrupt and unnatural. At the sound, Xuanmin’s eyes, which hadn’t opened in days, snapped open.

Whenever Xue Xian took dragon form, thunder and lightning followed. Xuanmin had grown so accustomed to it that the mere sound of thunder made him expect Xue Xian to descend upon him.

Just as quickly, he closed his eyes again. In this state, neither ghost nor lingering attachment, no one could see him or divine his whereabouts. How could Xue Xian possibly come to him?

“This thunder—!” Tongdeng exclaimed in surprise.

Before he could finish, the lightning concealed within the heavens reared its head, a stark white flash that zigzagged like a twisted, knotted branch. It lashed down from above, its target crystal clear: Daze Temple. Tongdeng watched as the bizarre bolt of lightning hurtled toward their roof, only to halt abruptly at the last moment, as if restrained by some unseen force.

The lightning had come inexplicably and left just as mysteriously. Had it been meant to startle them?

Or perhaps…

Was it Tongdeng’s imagination, or had that thunder carried an overwhelming, divine energy? Not the kind summoned by talismans or spells, but the kind seen in heavenly tribulations.

Who could possibly be undergoing a tribulation?

Tongdeng wondered if he might have been mistaken. He turned to Xuanmin. “Unless…it’s your dragon?”

What did he mean, *“your dragon”*? Xuanmin didn’t bother opening his eyes. He refused to entertain any unrealistic delusions.

But he didn’t need to respond, because Tongdeng already had his answer. The moment the question left his lips, the distant roar of a dragon echoed through the air. Within a few seconds, a figure clad in black descended amid a barrage of lightning to land with a thunderous crash in front of their building.

The commotion was too loud, and very familiar. Not even Xuanmin could remain indifferent. His eyes flew open, and he stared at the doorway, stunned.

Xue Xian looked no different. His complexion was still pale, his features as striking as ever, but to Xuanmin, it seemed an eternity since they’d last met. Though they were mere steps apart, an inexplicable longing, as expansive as life and death itself, welled up inside him. His gaze locked onto Xue Xian like a mountain’s immovable weight.

Xue Xian, however, seemed puzzled. He stood at the threshold yet acted like he couldn’t see either of the men in the room. His brow furrowed as he scanned the space, his expression layered with something heavy and unreadable.

Xue Xian couldn’t see Xuanmin.

Of course he couldn’t.

The light in Xuanmin’s eyes dimmed, replaced by a gentleness both weighty and profound. It was a look that would make the heart of any witness twinge in shared sorrow.

Then, Xue Xian’s gaze passed over where Xuanmin was seated and paused. He narrowed his eyes, staring intently. Tentatively, he called out, “Bald donkey?”

“Tch!” Tongdeng uttered.

Xue Xian was oblivious to Tongdeng. His eyes remained fixed on the space where Xuanmin was.

“Mm,” came Xuanmin’s low reply.

Tongdeng clicked his tongue again.

Xue Xian didn’t hear the response. He stared at the spot, waiting in silence. When no answer came, he grabbed a thin cord from his sleeve and

looped it twice around his wrist. With a faint gleam, the cord twitched to life.

“Since you won’t answer,” Xue Xian muttered, fiddling with the cord, “don’t blame me for this.”

He held the other end of the cord, took aim in Xuanmin’s general direction, and flicked his wrist. The cord lunged through the air like a living creature, darting around Xuanmin before it coiled around his wrist and looped itself into a tight knot.

The moment it knotted itself, Xue Xian’s tense expression relaxed. A silent laugh tugged his lips upward.

“Caught you,” he said.

Both Tongdeng and Xuanmin were speechless. What kind of trick was this?! Tongdeng had wandered the world for over a century. Never had he seen someone lasso a spirit with a string!

The moment the cord wrapped around him, Xuanmin’s form slowly materialized in Xue Xian’s vision. His unfocused gaze sharpened, locking onto Xuanmin’s face before sweeping over the rest of him.

For a fleeting moment, Xue Xian’s eyes watered, but he quickly quashed it. His smirk remained, and the gloom in his eyes vanished, replaced by familiar audacity. He gave the cord a playful tug. “I made one for Jiang Shining’s brother-in-law a while back. I never thought I’d use it myself.”

His fingers twirled the cord lazily, and its slack length grew taut, tugging on Xuanmin’s wrist. It was as if he were a lazy fisherman reeling in his catch. As he tugged Xuanmin back to him, he threw out some teasing: “You’re lucky I didn’t toss it away.”

Mere moments ago, Xuanmin had been unable to touch anything, not even a thread. But Xue Xian’s fragile cord was like a line that tethered Xuanmin across the boundary of life and death. His insubstantial form suddenly colored with the weight of endless longing, turning solid and grounded. He dropped onto the cushion, and a surge of spiritual energy flowed through the cord. Just like that, he’d become tangible.

Tongdeng, who'd been cultivating for centuries, turned his face away in silence.

With Xuanmin found, all of the anguish Xue Xian had suffered dissipated like smoke. He stayed outside the room, his demeanor turning flippant.

"What are you doing just sitting there like an idiot? Get over here! I'm not here to pray and offer incense. I came to capture you!" He yanked cheekily at the thin cord a couple of times, urging his prize catch to stand and come on over.

And Xuanmin let himself be reeled in by the wrist. "All right," he said as he rose to his feet.

Replying "all right" to being captured? What a thing to say, Tongdeng thought.

Perhaps it was due to the effect of the cord, or perhaps remnants of their bond through the coins still lingered—either way, after a few tugs, Xue Xian frowned and glanced at Tongdeng in confusion.

"Why's there a white shadow next to you?"

Xuanmin was taken aback. "A white shadow?"

"Earlier, you looked like a white shadow too. Here one moment, gone if I blinked. I even thought…my eyes were playing tricks on me."

Something like *I hallucinated you from sheer longing* was too mortifying to voice.

Xuanmin's eyes rippled with candlelight, and his eyes settled warmly on Xue Xian. The latter's smirk deepened.

"Explain yourself," Xue Xian teased. "Who's hiding beside you?"

Tongdeng shot Xuanmin a sidelong look. "Your dragon has quite the mouth on him."

Luckily, Xuanmin didn't need to explain. Xue Xian had already tapped into his senses. He vaguely heard what Tongdeng said, though he only caught the beginning.

Amused, Xue Xian picked at his ear like he needed it cleaned. "Sorry, didn't get all that," he deadpanned. "Who did he say I belonged to? What

audacious fool dares to claim a dragon as their own?”

Xuanmin paused. He suddenly had the feeling that he was being ganged up on.

Tongdeng raised an eyebrow in surprise. “You can hear me?”

With the cord firmly secured around Xuanmin’s wrist, Tongdeng’s figure also grew clearer in Xue Xian’s vision. Realization dawned on him.

Xue Xian had never been one for polite greetings, and at the sight of a monk, the words *bald donkey* instinctively formed in his mouth. Before the second could escape, he bit it back. “Ah, another bald…monk.”

You think I won’t notice just because you swallowed it down? Tongdeng wondered.

In terms of age and experience, Xue Xian was undoubtedly the eldest among the three. Being a mighty dragon, he bowed to no one, and if he did spout nonsense, who could stop him? However, this once, he held back out of consideration for Xuanmin. The monk before him wore robes identical to Xuanmin’s, and his demeanor was similarly transcendent. It wasn’t hard to guess his identity.

Besides, after Xue Xian used it day after day, “bald donkey” had long since morphed into something like an endearment when directed at Xuanmin. Using it for another monk felt wrong.

After a pause, Xue Xian stated with certainty, “You’re Tongdeng.”

“Mm.” Tongdeng’s solid grunt sounded eerily like Xuanmin’s—proof of their shared lineage. Tongdeng looked askance at Xuanmin again and added, “He knows quite a lot, doesn’t he?”

Though his tone mirrored Xuanmin’s usual calm, there was a teasing edge to it. Xue Xian found it amusing. This was the first person he’d met who was genuinely connected to Xuanmin—his master, no less. The novelty wasn’t lost on Xue Xian. Though, judging by their states, this master-disciple pair shared more than just mannerisms.

“So, this shifu of yours,” Xue Xian began, his expression complicated as he turned to Xuanmin. “He also used the Nameless Spiders?”

Xuanmin nodded—then stopped mid-motion as he caught the implication. “How do you know about them?”

“It was written plain as day on Baichong Cave’s walls, no?” Xue Xian said.

“But…you couldn’t read that.”

“I couldn’t.” Xue Xian cocked his head at Xuanmin. “So you thought it was safe to lie to me in there, hm? Who was it that swore up and down he’d never lie to me? My memory’s a bit foggy. Ah, really, who was it? Do you remember?”

“…It was me.” Xuanmin lowered his eyes briefly before meeting Xue Xian’s gaze again. “I didn’t—”

Technically, it hadn’t been a lie. The Nameless Spiders *did* only deal in fortune and misfortune; they didn’t bind people across three lives. He’d merely omitted some details to spare Xue Xian the worry.

But Xue Xian was determined to prod Xuanmin further and cut him off before he could explain. “So, every word you said in that cave was true? There wasn’t a single lie?”

Xuanmin was silent. He really had lied, just once: *“A peaceful death in old age,”* he’d claimed.

Tongdeng couldn’t take it anymore and turned away. “Foot in mouth,” he muttered.

This wasn’t really an attempt at a guilt-trip on Xue Xian’s part. After all, there was nothing for Xuanmin to feel guilty about. It was just that Xue Xian hadn’t spoken to Xuanmin in what felt like forever, and he couldn’t resist ruffling him a little.

In truth, it had been less than a month, but to Xue Xian, it had ached like an eternity.

When Xuanmin didn’t draw closer, Xue Xian gave the thin cord another playful tug, which made Xuanmin’s hanging hand sway a little. This time, however, Xue Xian didn’t linger outside the door. Instead, he strode right in and unceremoniously plopped himself down at the foot of the Buddha statue beside Xuanmin.

Tongdeng averted his gaze again.

Xue Xian patted Xuanmin's shoulder and grumbled, "Do me a favor and tell your master, if he ever needs to leave a message again, he'd better not write it in some cryptic script. This is all thanks to me finding that old book in your bamboo pagoda explaining those symbols. Otherwise, you'd have been stuck here for at least a century."

"No need to relay messages. I can hear you," Tongdeng replied.

Using Xuanmin's shoulder as an armrest, Xue Xian turned to Tongdeng. "Ah, so you and your disciple must share some deep-seated grudge, then."

Well. Even combined, the master and disciple were no match for him. After all, this was a bona fide wise one they were dealing with.

Tongdeng gave Xuanmin a long, deep look. "Where exactly did you pick up this dragon?"

"Scooped me up with some dirty copper," Xue Xian scoffed.

Tongdeng didn't hold back. "What a cursed fate."

Xuanmin did not reply.

Just like that, old and new grievances were settled. After over a century of solitude, Tongdeng had finally met someone who could hear him, and he was thoroughly enjoying himself. As he traded barbs with Xue Xian, he managed to rattle his unflappable disciple to the brink of cracking.

Fortunately, Xuanmin held onto his composure and steered the conversation to safety. "How did you find this place?" he asked Xue Xian.

Equally curious, Tongdeng stopped fanning the flames and waited to hear Xue Xian's answer.

"Weren't you bold, planting that Nameless Spider on me?" Xue Xian said. "I spent days poring over that book in your bamboo pagoda, deciphering every word about its effects. If I understood correctly, as long as that spider's on me, any calamity I face gets transferred to you."

He shot Xuanmin a dark look. Xuanmin seemed to have anticipated his glaring and had already lowered his eyes.

Xue Xian paused, thinking to himself that he'd have to find a way to undo the damn thing later. "Anyway, I came up with a plan. I've done

something like this a couple of times before, so I've got some experience. I forced my tribulation to arrive early. If the Nameless Spider really worked, then the moment the heavenly lightning struck, I'd know where you were. Right as the lightning descended, I forcibly postponed the tribulation again."

Xuanmin and Tongdeng were speechless. Divine lightning from the heavens—especially the kind that struck during tribulations—was not something mere mortals dared to trifle with. Yet this wise dragon spoke of advancing and postponing his tribulation as if it were child's play, orchestrating such a spectacle just to find one person. Such casual mastery over heavenly thunder was terrifying.

When Xue Xian decided to provoke his tribulation, he had already considered the risks. He'd once altered his tribulation schedule to avoid bringing calamity to the mortal world, giving him some knowledge of these matters, but there'd been no guarantee things would go smoothly this time. If something went wrong, he'd planned to shift into his dragon form and shield Xuanmin's location completely.

Let's see if that lightning can twist and turn its way past me to strike him instead! Xue Xian had thought. But he left such things unspoken. No need to tell Xuanmin—otherwise, Xue Xian would undoubtedly be subjected to a stern lecture.

Before landing at Daze Temple, Xue Xian had imagined finding Xuanmin and dragging him back without delay. Now, he was faced with Tongdeng, who floated in a liminal state alongside Xuanmin. Judging by their interactions, the bond between them seemed unexpectedly warm. Tonight was New Year's Eve, a time when mortals gathered with family, a night of reunion. Snatching the disciple away and leaving the master alone felt…inappropriate. So, when Xue Xian stepped inside, he resolved to let Xuanmin fulfill his duties as a disciple, at least for tonight.

But as this thought crossed Xue Xian's mind, Tongdeng spoke, having realized something. "Before you tied the cord earlier, it looked like you glimpsed him. Logically, existences like us aren't ghost or spirit, so he shouldn't have been visible…"

Xue Xian privately thought it might have been because his obsession was too deep, or their fates too intertwined—but as a prideful dragon, he

would never voice such sentimental drivel.

“Maybe he really wanted to see me, or maybe he really wanted to be seen by me,” Xue Xian said shamelessly as he patted Xuanmin’s shoulder.

The most unbearable part? That disgustingly saccharine line was met with acceptant silence by Tongdeng’s frosty, reticent disciple—there wasn’t even a hint of denial! On New Year’s Eve, of all times, he found the pair so insufferable they hurt to look at. He lifted a hand, pointed at the door as he turned away, and said in a breezy yet final tone: “Don’t let me keep you.”

He’d basically said *Go*, but he might as well have said *Get lost.*

Xue Xian and Tongdeng traded barbs while Xuanmin stood by, helpless. It was a rare sight.

All three had once been solitary by nature. Though their temperaments differed, they shared a core similarity: One had founded the Tianji Institute with its strict “no outsiders” rule, one was so icy he’d barely utter three words in as many days, and one had drifted through centuries with little connection to the mortal world. No one could’ve predicted that putting them in a space together would create such chaos.

The disorder only escalated when Xuanmin’s black bird arrived. With two eerie, sighing croaks, it soared into the room, wings spread, clutching a delicate bamboo basket. Mid-flight, it abruptly changed course and dove straight into Xuanmin’s arms.

Xue Xian raised a brow. “Do you have to be everywhere?”

The bird snapped its beak at him in defiance.

“Oh, this thing’s still alive?” Tongdeng remarked dryly.

“You know it?” Xue Xian asked—then recalled the string of coins the bird had once brought him and pieced the connection together.

“This bird’s older than him,” Tongdeng said, glancing at Xuanmin, “though it still acts like a spoiled fledgling.”

The bird shouldn’t have been able to hear or see Tongdeng, but this creature had never obeyed the rules governing ordinary beasts; it was practically a spirit. After Tongdeng spoke, it tilted its head in his direction, like it had caught a faint sound or sensed an old presence.

Xuanmin looked up. “Decades ago, I found it huddled in a corner of the Tianji Institute, one wing injured. You’ve met it before?”

Since he entered this state of half existence and reunited with Tongdeng, fragments of Xuanmin’s past life had surfaced, but only hazily. It was like awakening after a dream that he’d mostly forgotten, yet bits and pieces still lingered.

His impression of the bird remained unchanged from the time when he’d been six or seven. Back then, he’d assumed its appearance at the institute was mere chance. A rare and capricious longing for a pet had stirred within him, so he’d kept it all these years. But Tongdeng’s tone suggested their history ran much deeper.

“I did more than simply meet it,” Tongdeng said.

When the black bird had first arrived at the Tianji Institute, Tongdeng had been the state preceptor, and the Xuanmin from his previous life had just turned ten. At the time, Tongdeng was a little troubled. The disciple he’d raised was exceptional in every way, save for one flaw: He refused to engage with people. More like a snow effigy than a person since childhood, he showed no signs of thawing even as he aged.

While Tongdeng himself wasn’t exactly sociable, the sudden shift from being the aloof one to enduring someone else’s aloofness had been rather irritating. More importantly, he’d worried that Xuanmin’s detachment would leave him incapable of understanding human suffering. In an attempt to warm him up, Tongdeng had tried many methods before settling on one: Xuanmin needed a companion.

The black bird had arrived at the institute as an egg. Its hatching was impeccably timed; it cracked open precisely when Tongdeng presented it to Xuanmin. The first thing it saw was Xuanmin’s face, and from that moment, it imprinted on him. All its mischief, all its antics, were reserved for him alone.

As a hatchling, it resembled a chick: fluffy down, useless wings, stubby legs that could only hop at Xuanmin’s heels. Wherever Xuanmin went, it bounced along. If Xuanmin sat to read, it would nestle in a sunlit spot by his robes, dozing or rolling around. This bird matured slower than most. It hopped for ages before it learned to fly. From then on, it graduated from toddling after Xuanmin to flapping chaotically around him.

Aloof as Xuanmin was, over time, he accepted the bird as his pet. He regularly set out food and fresh water for it, but otherwise he let it roam free. He never interfered, whether it vanished for days or molted all over his robes. The bird even developed a bad habit and stole the occasional potent elixir, despite repeated scoldings. As long as it didn't poison itself, Xuanmin let it be.

To Tongdeng, this act carried a hint of "not minding," which, for Xuanmin, amounted to indulgence. In their decade together, he'd never seen Xuanmin tolerate another living creature so leniently. He never expected that, a century after his death, he'd witness his frosty, reticent disciple exhibit even greater leniency—toward an actual person. It was only upon meeting Xue Xian that Tongdeng realized the true extent of Xuanmin's indulgence.

It was only upon meeting Xue Xian that Tongdeng understood that his disciple was defenseless against creatures of the ever-troublesome variety. He'd begun to suspect Xuanmin only knew one response to Xue Xian: "All right."

Had he seen Xuanmin grab Xue Xian, his tone a little solemn and a little indulgent as he asked, "Done with your antics?" Tongdeng might've concluded his disciple was possessed. Outsiders would not have noticed anything amiss, but Tongdeng had raised Xuanmin. That tone? For him, it was downright teasing…

Xuanmin retrieved a flask of warmed wine and a porcelain cup from the intricately crafted bamboo basket the bird carried. It must have pilfered them from somewhere in anticipation of Xue Xian successfully finding Xuanmin tonight. A few more years, and the black bird might truly end up with human intelligence.

Xuanmin never drank. He blinked at the celadon flask before handing it to Xue Xian without a word.

Xue Xian accepted it, torn between laughter and exasperation. "What the hell have you been feeding this bird?"

"Elixirs," Tongdeng said succinctly.

Xue Xian blinked. Then, he gave the wine flask a slight shake, and a crisp, refreshing aroma wafted through the air.

“Autumn Dew White?” Tongdeng asked mildly.

Xue Xian nodded. “Smells like it. You’re quite familiar with wines?”

“Only this one.” Tongdeng seemed lost in memories as he absently added, “An old friend of mine was fond of Autumn Dew White. Every New Year’s Eve, he’d coax me into sharing a cup with him.”

In his retelling, he’d condensed everything into one simple word: coax. So light, so effortless. In reality, his friend had needed to cajole him and hoodwink him with endless excuses just to fill his tiny cup…

“Wait, hold on.” Xue Xian raised an eyebrow at Tongdeng, repeating slowly, “Sharing a cup? Autumn Dew White? You?”

Tongdeng responded with a nonchalant “Mm.”

Beside them, Xuanmin didn’t seem surprised. Though he hadn’t fully recalled his past life as a disciple, hearing Tongdeng name that wine had stirred a sense of familiarity, as if it were something he’d grown accustomed to.

Xue Xian frowned. “Monks can drink?”

Tongdeng raised his hand in a mudra. “I never took the precepts. Daze Temple was gone before I could.”

No precepts meant no vows to uphold. Xue Xian wasn’t well-versed in monastic rules, but he knew the basics. His face went blank.

“I see now,” he said, staring at Tongdeng and Xuanmin with dead eyes. “Not only do you and your disciple have some deep-seated grudge, your disciple also holds a vendetta against himself.”

Your whole damn lineage of monks aren’t even proper monks?! No vows, no restrictions, just pure, unadulterated self-flagellation?! Xue Xian could only sigh in wonder. State preceptors were built different—even their neuroses were more spectacular than everyone else’s!

He pointed at Xuanmin. “Fraud.”

Xuanmin shot Xue Xian a stunned look before turning his gaze toward Tongdeng.

“Rebellious, aren’t we? Your face says you’re displeased with your master.” Tongdeng coolly lifted his chin and gestured toward the door. “The

exit’s right there. See yourself out.”

In short, he was once again telling them to get lost.

“Spare this old man’s eyes. Go.” Tongdeng had absolutely no intention of spending New Year’s Eve with his unfilial disciple and this annoying dragon. “Leave the Autumn Dew White.”

“Hate to break it to you, but I’m probably eight hundred generations your senior,” Xue Xian scoffed.

Tongdeng fumed, but he couldn’t say anything to that.

Watching his master teeter on the edge of an aneurysm, Xuanmin remembered how to be a good disciple. He nodded at Tongdeng, then patted the back of Xue Xian’s head and said, “Let’s go.”

Despite the seriousness of his expression, the gesture gave the impression he was saying, *I’ll take this mouthy guy away now, Master.* Sorry about that.

Xue Xian didn’t mind at all. He turned to Xuanmin for confirmation. “Coming back with me? You’re not gonna loiter here anymore?”

Loitering? Was that what Xue Xian was calling it?

“Mm,” Xuanmin said, his gaze steady.

Tongdeng massaged his temples before shoving both men—and the bird—out the door.

By the time Xue Xian and Xuanmin returned to the bamboo pagoda, night had fallen. Perhaps the spiritual energy channeled through the cord had intensified, or maybe it was because Xuanmin was now close to his physical body—either way, when Xue Xian lit the lamp, he noticed a faint bloodred mole emerge at the crook of Xuanmin’s neck. The Life-Sharing Spider’s effects, after days of dormancy, had at last taken hold on his spiritual form.

The moment the mole fully formed on Xuanmin’s spirit, his silent, recumbent physical body underwent a change as well. His dulled mole brightened again, vivid as blood that had finally reached its destination. Before he could speak, he felt himself swept up in a whirlwind. The world spun violently, and an immense force pulled at him until dizziness overwhelmed him.

His vision blacked out.

When it returned, he found himself lying on his back.

“Finally…” Xue Xian’s voice, heavy with relief, sounded beside him.

Xuanmin froze for a moment before he sat straight up. His limbs felt heavy, utterly unlike the weightlessness he’d grown accustomed to. He stared at his hands, then lifted his gaze to Xue Xian.

“I—”

“From now on, you’ll share a dragon’s lifespan.” Xue Xian slapped his palms onto the bamboo bed, leaning in until their faces were inches apart. His voice was low and deliberate. “No take-backs. You’re stuck with me for centuries. Millennia, even! If you ever get sick of it, tough luck.”

Xuanmin’s dark eyes were fathomless. He seemed to consider his words before he met Xue Xian’s gaze unflinchingly.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he said.

It was the first time Xue Xian had ever heard such direct affirmation from Xuanmin. He blinked, stunned—then grinned, the expression equal parts mischievous and smug.

“Well, this does count as a life-saving favor. How do you plan to repay me, hm?”

Xue Xian was just teasing him. Xuanmin almost never won during their verbal sparring matches. Nine times out of ten, he’d hesitate, leaving Xue Xian free to bulldoze him with nonsense. He loved watching Xuanmin flounder, speechless and exasperated. But the heavens clearly had it out for Xue Xian this time. The moment the words left his mouth, and before he could play up his dissolute act further, a traitorous growl sounded from somewhere.

Xue Xian froze. He paused, then decided to act like nothing had happened. He was ready to resume his malicious teasing when another growl sounded.

The smirk on Xue Xian’s face started to crack, so he abruptly wiped it away and stared at Xuanmin. “Go on. Tell me you heard nothing.”

“You’re hungry,” Xuanmin said, calmly exposing him.

“Listen here, bald donkey.” Xue Xian bared his teeth in a sinister smile. “If you keep talking like that, you’ll die alone.”

“I have you.” Xuanmin said it like it was the most natural thing in the world, then put a hand on Xue Xian’s shoulder. “I’ll go out. What do you want to eat?”

This bamboo hut was his, after all. He knew these mountains—where to find food, where to forage—far better than Xue Xian.

“People,” Xue Xian said flatly. As if to mock him, his stomach growled again.

“This mountain has everything except people.”

Xuanmin stood, only to stagger and drop back onto the bed. Until now, he’d seemed composed, as if waking in his body had entirely restored him. Xue Xian was accustomed to the monk’s ironclad resilience and had almost believed it. Only now did he realize how far Xuanmin was from a full recovery.

After all, Xuanmin hadn’t just been napping in that bed. He’d died.

However, Xuanmin seemed unbothered. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he slapped a talisman over his heart and some color returned to his face. Without pausing to recuperate any more, he rose again.

“Do you really want to eat people?” he asked quietly.

How does he manage to say such nonsense with a straight face? The still-seated Xue Xian grabbed Xuanmin’s wrist and yanked him back onto the bed. “Eat what? Get back on this bed, right now.”

Only then did Xue Xian grasp how weak Xuanmin was. He hadn’t needed any strength to pull him down.

“You need food first. Recovery can wait,” Xuanmin insisted.

“Shut up.” Xue Xian fished out a string of copper coins from his sleeve, their light flickering under his fingertips. “Your bird gave me these.” He dangled the coins for Xuanmin. “Guess they were yours once. When I was refining my bones, I borrowed some of their power, then poured some spirit back into them. Use them to recover. We can eat after that.”

The coins Xuanmin had used in this life had been given to him by Zuhong—a tradition among state preceptors. He'd used that one set since the tender age of six, but those were now buried, anchoring the rivers and mountains. These were from a past life.

Xuanmin took them and studied the energies within. The strongest was his own. Xue Xian's was there too, flowing with a rich warmth. And there was one more faint trace that seemed like a remnant from years past.

That last trickle of spiritual energy should have been a stranger to him, but over these past few days, he'd grown so familiar with it he identified it right away. Tongdeng.

"Tongdeng must have given me these in my previous life," Xuanmin said.

Xue Xian lifted one brow. "Previous *previous* life." Xue Xian tilted his chin up, eyes glinting with mischief, not to mention something wilder. "In this one, from the moment you opened your eyes…every bit of you was mine."

Xuanmin turned to him. The lamplight caught in his dark eyes, warm and steady. "Mm. All yours."

The kindness of saving a life was something that could never be repaid.

"So you'll listen to whatever I say?" Xue Xian pressed.

Xuanmin hummed in agreement.

"Then hold onto those puny coins and fix your body first." Xue Xian rapped the bed frame for emphasis.

Without warning, Xuanmin's erudite bird came flapping in with a cloth bundle clutched in its beak. It dropped the bundle onto Xue Xian's lap, spilling its contents.

The bird was a treasure. It knew exactly how to solve its master's problems, because the bundle was stuffed full of food. It was just…well…

Xue Xian gave the bundle a cursory glance—fruit. All fruit.

The bird had picked their meal according to its own tastes, but food was food. If it meant convincing Xuanmin to focus on recovery instead of

feeding Xue Xian, he wasn't about to complain. He snorted and tapped the bird's forehead. "At least you're good for something."

With that, Xue Xian plucked a fresh persimmon from the pile, tossing it idly in his hand before he nodded at Xuanmin. "I'll snack on this. You focus on healing. Anything else in these mountains requires effort, and I'm too lazy. We'll hit a proper eatery in town at dawn."

In the end, Xuanmin obeyed and settled down by the bed to meditate. He had used these coins for an entire lifetime, and they were infused with Xue Xian's spiritual energy on top of that. They accelerated his healing greatly, and what should have been a grave injury was nearly mended by morning.

All night, faint sounds accompanied Xuanmin's meditation. The crisp crunch of Xue Xian biting into fruit. The rustle of robes as he rose, footsteps light. He drifted to another room, pulled books from wooden shelves, and returned. He thought to settle by the window but changed his mind, dropping onto the bamboo bed beside Xuanmin instead.

When Xuanmin opened his eyes, this was the scene before him:

Xue Xian lounged against the wall, his long legs comfortably crossed. He was leaning a little to the side in a pose that radiated indolence. Pale dawn light spilled through the window, painting his profile in soft hues. He lazily lifted his gaze from the book, and when he spoke, his voice was low and unhurried.

"Done already? I haven't even finished this."

"Mm."

"I spent all night on it. Hungry?" Xue Xian started rummaging through the remaining fruit. "How are you, a mortal, more resistant to hunger than me?" he muttered as he searched. He'd barely stopped eating all night, and only two fruits remained—one bore a hole from a worm, while the other was a persimmon. "The persimmon's not bad. Sweet. Want a taste?"

Translation: The only edible thing left was the persimmon. Xue Xian's enticing offer made it sound like he'd saved the fruit, when he just hadn't gotten around to eating it. Regardless, Xue Xian nudged the

damaged fruit aside and picked up the persimmon. Xuanmin's eyes were on him when he looked up.

"What're you looking at me like that for? Do I have juice on my face?" Xue Xian shoved the fruit into Xuanmin's hand and swiped at his cheek.

His words might have been sharp, but he behaved with complete ease, as if they had already spent countless dawns like this. Xuanmin had the sudden thought that this was why he'd chosen to live in this secluded bamboo pagoda. It was for moments like these, tranquil and unhurried. Ten years, a century, or a millennium—he'd never tire of it.

What happened next could have been for many reasons. Because last night had marked Xuanmin's rebirth into a life irrevocably tied to Xue Xian. Because brushes with death changed a man, and loosened the locks on certain emotions…

Xuanmin studied Xue Xian, then caught his wrist and pulled his hand away from his face. Xuanmin's thumb brushed a stray drop of fruit juice from Xue Xian's chin.

Once, twice, Xuanmin's thumb stroked Xue Xian's skin. The suggestive press of fingertip to skin stirred something in Xue Xian.

He let Xuanmin cradle his chin for a time before he narrowed his eyes and drawled, "Unless I'm mistaken, back on Heishi Shore, you did something behind my back."

Xuanmin's reply was warm and low. "What?"

Xue Xian set the book aside, squeezed Xuanmin's wrist for leverage, and leaned in. He brushed a kiss against Xuanmin's lips, then flopped back against the wall, where he picked up his book as if nothing had happened. "Never mind. We're even." His crossed legs swung back and forth like a cat's idle tail.

Xuanmin was silent for a long moment before murmuring, "No."

Xue Xian stilled. "Hm? What do you mean, no?"

"You forgot to cover your eyes."

Before Xue Xian could react, Xuanmin's hand was already over his eyes. As Xue Xian's vision was plunged into darkness, his breath hitched.

He couldn’t see anything at all.

Then, Xuanmin kissed him.

Their last kiss on the black-stone beach had been a mere brush of lips; it could hardly have been called a taste. It’d lacked any thrill or intimacy, and it had felt more like a solemn farewell, done with the knowledge that they’d never meet again. Back then, Xue Xian’s senses were just beginning to return, which left him with only a faint impression of the touch on his lips. Had he not witnessed the scene of Xuanmin’s death in Baichong Cave, he wouldn’t have noticed, as he was in no state to pay attention to such things at the time.

Now, he was experiencing Xuanmin’s kiss.

Xuanmin usually felt distant and unapproachable, like an austere sculpture of ice, cold and steadfast. Looking at him from afar, one might imagine that his skin, flesh, and bones were made of snow, that his very breath was frigid. On the contrary, his kiss was warm, imbued with an ineffable tenderness, as if he’d channeled the softest and deepest sentiments of his being into the action.

Such intimacy was probably something Xuanmin would show once in a century at most, so how could Xue Xian hold his ground? He immediately surrendered. Enveloped in the warmth of his emotions, he tilted his head back to respond.

With a nuzzle against Xuanmin’s cool nose, Xue Xian parted his lips slightly. The smile on them was still fresh.

An hour later, that warm and careless smile had vanished without a trace.

Xue Xian was burning with regret. If only he hadn’t opened his mouth and licked Xuanmin’s lips apart, then tangled their tongues together. He wouldn’t be here now, with one hand on Xuanmin’s waist, their fingers interlocked, straddling him…

Xuanmin was drenched in sweat; Xue Xian even more so. Their bodies slid against each other, wet and slippery, and even their tightly entwined fingers were starting to come apart. Either dragon saliva was just too devastating, or their heart-to-heart had released all of their restraint. Xue Xian had never imagined such a loss of control. His kisses and bites on

Xuanmin were frantic and impatient, and his knees were stamped with red imprints from digging into the bed.

His legs tensed as he thrust his hips down hard. His narrowed eyes glazed over again, and his dark lashes were damp. An uncontrollable flush rose around his eyes, then he pressed against Xuanmin's lips. His own parted to release a long, shuddering breath. There was a soft moan carried within.

His fingers spasmed desperately and lost their grip from the sweat, so he grabbed onto Xuanmin's taut arm instead. As Xue Xian struggled for breath, Xuanmin's unoccupied hand closed around the dragon's waist and brought him down harder.

Xue Xian gasped, but the breath caught in his throat when Xuanmin's half-open eyes flitted over his lips. Xuanmin's other hand raised to cup Xue Xian's chin, bringing him back for another kiss.

Ages and ages ago, Xue Xian had wanted to laugh in people's faces when he heard the rumor that dragons were naturally lustful. He'd lived for millennia, and he'd never before felt any relation between that phrase and himself.

But there might have been some truth to that saying after all…

Still, it wasn't his fault. It was the dragon saliva. Oh, or the coins and the red cord. The saliva had originally been Xuanmin's problem alone, but with the other accursed things thrown in the mix, the dragon himself had been snared.

Fine. Maybe finally getting what I wanted also played a part.

In any case, the threads of karma and consequence were far too complex. After combining all these factors, Xue Xian finally concluded that he could spend the rest of his life in bed like this.

But Xuanmin had only just recovered, and he'd lost his Buddha bones before dying. Though Xue Xian had confirmed multiple times that Xuanmin's hips were whole again, Buddha bones couldn't be extracted without consequence. There were some lingering effects, undoubtedly. Out of fear that Xuanmin might strain himself, Xue Xian had taken the initiative to straddle his hips. Otherwise, Xue Xian wouldn't have climbed on him like this. Certainly not.

Of course, it felt good, so Xue Xian had little to regret in that regard. There was just one frustration he directed at himself—he should have held out one more day so he could have grabbed a bite to eat. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been stuck here, starving while perspiration ran down his chest.

It took them three days of starts and stops before they managed to get themselves presentable again. As they made their way out of the mountain hollow through the heavy white mist, Xuanmin's black bird huddled at the edge of the tangled forest, its wings drawn in. It seemed to have suffered through some extraordinary fright, and it drooped its head, forlorn.

Xue Xian crossed his arms, his black robes fluttering in the mountain valley breeze. He tilted his head to eye the black bird perched among the branches.

"This thing's lived over a century, right? Is it dying?" he remarked without turning back to Xuanmin. "Seriously, look at all the feathers it lost." He nudged the scattered plumage beneath the tree with his foot and clicked his tongue. "Maybe we should pick up some treats for it later. Let it enjoy its final days in comfort."

The black bird was so incensed it nearly toppled over. Its claws slipped, leaving it to plummet from the branch. By the time it remembered it could fly, it was almost in Xue Xian's arms. Flapping wildly, it veered away, circled at a distance, then reluctantly looped back.

During their activities in the hut, the bird had witnessed—or at least overheard—more than it'd bargained for. Given its intelligence, Xue Xian suspected the stress had caused its feather loss, though who could say if it was due to shock or concern.

Xue Xian and the bird forever seemed at odds, but when he was ravenous, it would fetch him food. Perhaps during those long weeks of separation from Xuanmin, they'd developed a grudging but codependent bond. In any case, Xuanmin found their dynamic mystifying.

"Follow or not, do as you wish," Xuanmin said to the bird. He tapped Xue Xian's shoulder, urging him onward.

The bird hesitated, circling around twice, before it flapped after them. It alighted on Xuanmin's shoulder, adjusting its delicate claws as it

cautiously nuzzled his cheek.

“Quite the opportunist,” Xue Xian scoffed, side-eyeing the bird.

The bird chirped at him, then hopped onto his shoulder to nuzzle him as well.

“What a fair-minded bird you are, making sure no one gets left out.” Xue Xian snorted, but he didn’t protest.

Then, Xuanmin reached over, deftly unhooked the bird’s claws, and plucked it from Xue Xian’s shoulder.

The black bird was astonished. Just wonderful—snubbed no matter whom it approached. Imagine, a mighty spirit bird like itself, losing more dignity with each passing day. An unwanted third wheel…a *third bird*!

Summoning its courage, it shakily smacked both of them across the face with a wing, then launched into the sky, where it flew above them in agitated circles.

A couple of indignant squawks later, its tone changed, and it began chirping urgently in one direction. Xue Xian and Xuanmin turned to see a gray carrier pigeon swooping toward them.

Xuanmin raised a hand, and the pigeon landed on his finger, its tiny claws gripping it without fear. Clearly, the pigeon was accustomed to this. After untying the message tube from its leg, Xuanmin unrolled the paper inside and skimmed its contents.

Xue Xian peeked at the seal. “The Court of Imperial Sacrifices?”

“Mm.” Xuanmin glanced at him. “Did you talk to them in my stead?”

The letter had been written by the chief diviner but made no mention of the two state preceptors. Instead, it methodically reported the court’s recent operations and the relief efforts for the riverside citizens. Clearly, someone had given them meticulous orders.

After the flood receded and the skies cleared, everyone caught in the blood arrays at Daze Temple, Lake Dongting, Mount Wanshi, and Heishi Shore had collapsed in exhaustion. Though their lives hadn’t been in danger, they’d remained out cold for some time.

Xue Xian had seized the opportunity to alter most of their memories. He had little experience with such things, since he was the reckless type; mortals seeing him had never been his concern. Instead of fabricating intricate new memories, he'd just blurred them, leaving them with the impression that they'd had a frightening dream.

There was only one person whose memories he left untouched: the chief diviner at Daze Temple. When he entered the temple that day, his gaze had immediately caught on the mark of severance interrupting the blood array on the ground, and at its end had been the chief diviner's finger. A quick thought was all it took for Xue Xian to understand the story behind the mark. This woman and her group had encountered Xue Xian and Xuanmin at Mount Boji. Their attitudes toward Xuanmin, the looks and subtle cues, hadn't escaped Xue Xian's notice.

The woman hadn't appeared in Xuanmin's memories too often, but when she had, her every action exuded composure. She seemed like a dependable person, one who considered the bigger picture and remained faithful to her principles.

Thanks to this good impression Xue Xian had formed of her, he'd spared her memories. However, just because she'd retained her memories didn't mean Xue Xian had left her alone while she slept. Using dreams, he'd planted some tasks to be completed in her mind and explained the circumstances behind the state preceptor's identity.

With a capable person handling the cleanup, virtually all the repercussions had been smoothly dealt with. Though the Court of Imperial Sacrifices was under the state preceptor's jurisdiction, they weren't required to consult him on every single matter. Though Xuanmin had only been revived for a few weeks, the court had returned to normal and resumed its usual operations. They reassured the imperial court and populace in various regions, promptly quelling a variety of rumors.

Surprisingly, Xuanmin held no resentment toward Xue Xian and his meddling. Upon hearing his answer, Xuanmin handed the chief diviner's letter to him.

Since Xue Xian was the one who'd organized the cleanup, he should see it through, meaning he should be the one to reply to the letter. That just made sense to Xuanmin. He snapped off a dry twig and rubbed at its end

until a smear of black liquid squeezed from its tip, much like an ink-dipped pen. Then, he retrieved a thin piece of talisman paper from his robes and gave it to Xue Xian, indicating he should write a reply.

Xue Xian chewed on twig and thought for a moment. With a flourish, he scribbled down four words of generous praise: *Good girl, much obliged.*

Xuanmin gave the paper one look and calmly crumpled it into a ball. Taking out another thin sheet, he retrieved the twig from Xue Xian and wrote a reply with a few concise words of his own. There was no resemblance to Xue Xian's answer beyond *Much obliged*.

Xue Xian blinked, watching Xuanmin's serious face as he finished the task. A smile tugged at Xue Xian's lips, and he leaned in, elbow resting on Xuanmin's shoulder.

"Huh, I never thought you'd be such a stickler," Xue Xian said, casually scratching at Xuanmin's jaw.

After everything they'd done, a little scritch beneath the chin was nothing. Xuanmin ignored the teasing while he lit a flicker of flame and set the sheet aflame.

Once the last scrap of paper had burnt to ash, Xuanmin focused on the hand wiggling beside his face. He looked at that hand's willful owner. "You don't like it?"

"I love it." Xue Xian drew out the words, then grabbed Xuanmin's chin and pulled it toward himself the way a ruffian might tease a maiden. With an arch of his brow, he continued, "I couldn't love it more."

He watched Xuanmin release the pigeon. After the black bird guided the pigeon away for some food and water, he couldn't help but add with a smirk, "Hey, bald donkey. Does this mean that you'll do whatever it is I love?"

At Xue Xian's smile, Xuanmin thought deeply. His reply was just as serious. "As much as I can."

After all, a certain someone here was a master of turning everything upside down and making trouble. Mere mortals had their limits—Xuanmin had never been the type to make reckless promises.

“I don’t really like the robes you’re wearing,” Xue Xian said with a deliberate blink.

Xuanmin glanced down at his plain monk robes made of white hemp. He had a penchant for cleanliness—it was best if his things were spotless—so he preferred these types of robes. But if Xue Xian disliked them, changing them was no issue. “What should I wear instead?”

Xue Xian narrowed his eyes and dropped his voice low, his tone both teasing and suggestive. “Nothing at all. I far prefer you enrobed in sweat.”

To that, Xuanmin had no reply.

The black bird that’d just flown back let out a startled squawk. It twitched and smacked into a tree, then fell to the ground with a plop, where it lay like a lifeless corpse with its eyes rolled up. The gray pigeon behind it chirped in alarm, hopping anxiously between the branches.

Xuanmin’s expression froze in shock, while Xue Xian pressed his forehead against Xuanmin’s shoulder and burst out laughing.

“All right, you can keep wearing those robes for now, but on one condition. You’re paying for today’s meal.”

Having teased his fill, Xue Xian straightened up like nothing had happened and strode ahead. After walking a distance, he clasped his hands behind his back and crooked a finger at Xuanmin without looking back.

Xuanmin watched this provocation without a word, then shook his head and followed.

The sky stretched endless and blue above, and the mountain mist drifted around them like clouds. A lone bird darted through the forest as rows of white smoke billowed from the village chimneys. Their steps were unhurried, their robes whispering against the path without raising any dust. The mountain trail ahead meandered; time stretched just as endless as the sky. They started and stopped, stopped and started, their steps spanning the long passage of a lifetime.

Chapter 40:
Mortal Affairs

ANOTHER YEAR'S ORCHID AUTUMN arrived. By the seventh month, the summer heat had begun to wane, and the evening breeze carried a faint chill from the river that dispelled the lingering mugginess of the past two months, refreshing to both body and mind.

In Hugua Alley on the east side of Wolong County, one household was especially bustling, adorned with lanterns and streamers, full of laughter and chatter. This residence stood out compared to the others nearby. Piles of stone materials flanked its narrow gates, some partially carved while others were still roughly hewn. Somehow, the arrangement didn't appear cluttered and held a peculiar charm.

Two newly hung red lanterns swayed above the gate, each inscribed with a single character, the ink still wet: *Zhang*.

The master of this house was none other than Wolong County's renowned artisan, Shitou Zhang. Today marked his sixtieth birthday.

Over his lifetime, he'd traveled far and wide, rubbing shoulders with nobility and officials—a pretty good life, all things considered. Though grand celebrations were customary for such milestones, Shitou Zhang had opted for simplicity. His son and daughter were young, but steady and dependable. Early that morning, they'd delivered longevity peaches made of fine flour to the neighbors while refusing all gifts offered in return.

The true feast was reserved for close family. It was a modest gathering, but filled with loved ones, lively and brimming with warmth.

Modest, however, didn't mean shoddy. Shitou Zhang had splurged to hire the head chef from Wolong County's famed Tianxiang Residence, who had meticulously prepared their signature dishes all afternoon.

Shitou Zhang had set up three tables in the hall. Two tables were just enough to seat his family and relatives, as well as his two apprentices of over ten years. The third table was a little odd: It had only four chairs, despite being the same size as the others.

As evening approached, Shitou Zhang had a screen erected between this table and the others, lending it an air of mystery. More curiously, when they were arranging the cold dishes and refreshments, he'd instructed: *Vegetarian on one side, meat on the other.* Keep them separate.

Since they were family, they didn't mind, but they did ask Shitou Zhang a few questions.

"Honored guests" was all he answered, waving off their queries.

When the moon, not quite full, had climbed into the sky, a knock sounded at the door. Shitou Zhang hurried to greet the guest, and his face lit up at the sight of the young man outside. "Ah, Nianqi! Have you grown taller again?"

Standing outside the door was Lu Nianqi. Over a decade had passed, and he was no longer the alarmingly frail boy he had once been. A hint of his youthful self lingered in his features, and the red mole between his brows still remained, but other than that, he'd grown into a tall and slender young man. The hint of scholarly refinement he now had lent him a slight resemblance to Jiang Shining.

"Perhaps you've shrunk," Lu Nianqi retorted. "You didn't have a hunch last time I saw you at Old Li's shop."

His words were as cool and sharp as ever, and the first impression he gave was almost off-putting. But Shitou Zhang was long accustomed to it and paid no mind.

"Age catches up with us all," he said with a dismissive wave, pulling Lu Nianqi along. "I spent all my years bent over my craft. It's a wonder I didn't develop a hunched back sooner. I can't compare to you youngsters. Where *are* those little rascals you picked up?"

"They wore themselves out playing and turned in early," Lu Nianqi replied. "They wouldn't stay put if they came, anyway. Maybe in a few years."

Perhaps because Lu Shijiu—Lu Nianqi's elder brother—had been adopted by their father after being found abandoned in the mountains, Lu Nianqi had taken to rescuing discarded children himself. Whenever he stumbled upon one by the roadside or under a bridge, he'd bring them home

and teach them to read and write. His reputation as a spirit medium had grown over the years, so supporting a few extra mouths was no hardship.

When Shitou Zhang sent the invitation, he'd suggested Lu Nianqi bring the three little ones along. But Lu Nianqi had declined. For those children, the memories of their rough beginnings were fresh. They were wary of strangers.

Shitou Zhang hadn't pressed further, even though he was the meddlesome sort, always poking into others' affairs. At first, he worried the children might never warm up to Lu Nianqi, but then he reconsidered and set his mind at ease.

Because this was Lu Nianqi. Their occasional run-ins over the years always brought a rush of emotion to Shitou Zhang. He'd watched the once-sullen, guarded boy mature into the person he was today—proof, perhaps, that kindness and warmth could be passed down like an inheritance.

"They're not here yet?" Lu Nianqi asked as they walked inside. He glanced upward.

His eyes remained as they'd been for years—not completely blind, but only just that. With the growth of his divination skills, the impairment no longer hindered his day-to-day life.

Shitou Zhang followed his gaze and shook his head. "Might be a while yet."

Others in the courtyard looked up too, baffled. Shitou Zhang's children had arrived late—his son, just past twenty, was a couple of years younger than Lu Nianqi, while his daughter, still sixteen, was in the spring of her youth. Thankfully, she took after her mother. She peered skyward several times before she couldn't contain herself anymore and nudged her father.

"What're you staring at up there for, Dad?"

Shitou Zhang doted on his daughter. Had anyone else asked, he'd have brushed off the question, but for her, he couldn't resist whispering, "Waiting for our honored guests."

"Dad… Did you eat spoiled rice again?"

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Shitou Zhang said, torn between laughter and exasperation.

Lu Nianqi chose that moment to interject dryly: “Your daughter has the look of good fortune about her.”

Am I supposed to thank him for that? Shitou Zhang wondered.

Just then, a low rumble of thunder rolled across the sky.

The people in the courtyard froze.

“That thunder came out of nowhere,” someone said. “What’s going on?”

“Doesn’t matter where it came from, that means rain. Let’s get inside!” someone else called.

Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi kept their eyes on the heavens. “They’re here,” Shitou Zhang murmured, delighted.

Years ago, after narrowly surviving the ordeal on Heishi Shore, he and Lu Nianqi had bade farewell to Xue Xian and Xuanmin to return to Wolong County. Before parting, Xue Xian had given each of them three paper talismans. Whenever they were in danger, they were to write a message on one and burn it, and then he’d come to their aid. Lu Nianqi had stored his away carefully and never intended to use them. Shitou Zhang, too, had kept his untouched. Until now.

But this wasn’t a call for help. After twelve years, he’d just wanted to invite them to his birthday feast.

There was a saying among the common folk: *Once you hit sixty, you must celebrate each birthday lavishly, for who knows if there’ll be a seventy or eighty?* Each year was borrowed time; if you missed the chance to meet your friends, that might mean an eternal farewell.

Not that Shitou Zhang was so pessimistic. He’d chosen to invite Xue Xian and Xuanmin this year because his two apprentices had finally completed their training. From now on, he would retire from carving—in the martial world, it would’ve been the equivalent of hanging up his sword. His final masterpiece was a set of auspicious jade pieces, finished just days prior. He wished to seize his chance and gift them to his old friends tonight.

Distant thunder reverberated from the horizon, only to dissipate at the far end of Hugua Alley. The courtyard emptied as people hurried indoors. Shitou Zhang turned and called out. Soon, steaming dishes began to appear on the tables.

Knock knock.

Perfect timing. The sound came just as the last plate was set in place. Rubbing his hands together, Shitou Zhang looked up to see two silhouettes —one in black, one in white—standing in the opened doorway.

The man in dark robes still had his knuckles raised. He looked amused. “It’s been years, and you’ve somehow grown even shorter.”

Fantastic, Shitou Zhang thought. Even after so many years, this wise one’s tongue was as sharp as ever.

It was Xue Xian and Xuanmin.

The doorway wasn’t wide, so the two entered single file. The moment Xue Xian entered, Shitou Zhang’s daughter gaped. Mesmerized, she stared at Xue Xian’s face, then tugged on her father’s sleeve.

“Dad, didn’t you say you’d be very careful picking a husband for me? Can you find me one this handsome?” she whispered.

Shitou Zhang nearly collapsed. “Child, could you have a little mercy on your father?”

Xue Xian’s sharp ears missed not a word of their whispers, of course. Flattered by her compliments, he flashed the girl a grin. “This little lady’s yours? She’s as pretty as a mountain blossom.”

The girl, even more dazzled by his smile, swayed a little on her feet.

No sooner had Xue Xian approached them than she caught sight of Xuanmin’s face behind him. She gaped again. She couldn’t help tugging on her father’s sleeve once more.

“Dad, someone—”

Dreading that she’d say *Someone like this would do as well*, Shitou Zhang hastily interrupted her. “Don’t be silly, you’re being rude to our honored guests. Go on, go find your mother,” he said, annoyed.

The girl stole another couple of glances at their guests before she went into the house, peeking back the entire way.

The table behind the screen was set for four: Xue Xian, Xuanmin, Lu Nianqi, and Shitou Zhang. The moment Xue Xian sat down, he blinked at the table full of dishes. In a rare moment of sincerity, he said to Shitou Zhang, “I see you went to a lot of trouble.”

The dishes weren’t just neatly divided between meat dishes and vegetarian ones—every single one, from the greens to the meats, catered to the tastes of those present. Each local delicacy Xue Xian had mentioned craving during their travels was laid out here, with not one missing.

“And this wine…” Shitou Zhang shook the flask in his hand. “A friend of mine’s the best brewer around, and he set this aside for me special. Any later and the entire stock would have been snatched up.” He patted the nearby wine jar. “Plenty more where this came from. Drink your fill.”

He’d also remembered that Xuanmin didn’t drink and had a pot of fine tea brought over for him.

Xue Xian poured a cup of the wine and took a whiff. The aroma alone was rich enough to make him feel a little tipsy. “What’s this called? If it lives up to the smell, I’ll be taking a batch home.”

“It’s called ‘Dragonlord’s Intoxication,’” Shitou Zhang said without thinking.

At Xue Xian’s silence, he thought, *Curse my loose tongue!* He let out an awkward chuckle and hurried to explain. “My friend just came up with that name on a whim! Pay it no mind, really!”

In truth, Xue Xian was a stranger to intoxication. Hearing the wine’s name, he just snorted. “Well then, I should give it a shot.”

And give it a shot he did—with unstoppable consequences. As it turned out, the name was no joke.

When they left Shitou Zhang’s place, Xue Xian still looked every bit the striking, composed figure. He was composed and unruffled, spine pencil-straight, complexion pale and not flushed. He bade Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi a clear and crisp farewell.

Even Xuanmin failed to notice anything amiss, at first. It wasn't until he'd walked the entire length of Hugua Alley and prepared to transform beneath the cover of night that Xue Xian showed signs of something unusual.

He reverted to his dragon form, ready to whisk Xuanmin up and into the skies. A swirl of white mist, and he shot upward in a magnificent arc, somersaulting through the clouds with dramatic flair—only to immediately wheel around and dive back down in embarrassment. In his exuberance, he'd left Xuanmin standing there.

Xuanmin eyed Xue Xian's bright, glittering eyes.

"Are you *really* not drunk?" Xuanmin asked skeptically.

"Of course not." He shook his head three times with utmost seriousness. "Do I look like a stumbling drunkard to you?" Then, without warning, he narrowed his eyes, grinned, and leaned in to lick Xuanmin's lips with his dragon tongue. After a slow, deliberate taste, he straightened up again and his mouth turned downward. "Huh. Why do I suddenly feel… warm?"

Like hell you're not drunk.

Behind the bamboo pagoda on Mount Boji, nestled against the cliffs, lay a hot spring. It wasn't particularly large, no more than seven yards across, but it was a secluded, peaceful spot bordered by wild bamboo and flowers. It even boasted a small bamboo pavilion.

For nearly a century, the mountain hollow's swirling mists and miasma, together with the local rumors, had kept all outsiders away. Untouched by everyone else, it was only used by the bamboo house's residents—once one, now two.

Xue Xian had managed to drink himself into a state of draconic inebriation, yet he remained convinced of his sobriety and determined to pull Xuanmin toward the clouds.

Xuanmin, accustomed to indulging Xue Xian's antics, really did ride the dragon back. However, Xue Xian went off course several times and almost took Xuanmin all the way to the border. Xuanmin's excellent sense of direction meant he corrected their course each time, but what should have been an easy journey turned into a tortuous ordeal. Through a mix of

cajoling and gentle trickery, Xuanmin eventually guided Xue Xian back home. They caught sight of Mount Boji's silhouette as the first light of dawn crept over the heavens.

They'd spent an entire night under the effects of the dragon saliva, and by now, it'd seeped into Xue Xian's skin and bones. He didn't even have the patience to find the bamboo pagoda. Instead, he dove straight down the cliff face toward the hot spring. His head spinning, he ended up transforming mid-plummet.

Xuanmin's robes billowed across the water's surface as he braced a hand against the cool stone edge of the pool. The moment he lifted his head, a small dark shadow darted past his field of vision. His hand moved instinctively to catch it.

There, dangling limply from his finger like a slender piece of rope, was a tiny black dragon. Its head drooped pathetically while its tail twitched and curled restlessly around his digit, squirming with obvious discomfort.

Xuanmin stared.

Even he was struggling against the effects of the dragon saliva—especially since *someone* kept aggravating it on purpose, amplifying its potency. Now, his lashes were damp, and his eyes shone dark and unfathomable beneath their heavy lids, laced with the desire he was holding back.

He nudged the drooping dragon's head with a finger, causing it to sway from side to side. "Wrong form," he said, voice low.

Xue Xian rubbed his coiled body restlessly against Xuanmin's hand. It took a long time for him to process his words, whereupon he realized he'd shrunk himself instead of reverting to human form. He gave a small huff and transformed back into a man.

Normally, he'd have materialized his robes the instant he transformed. This time, he'd only loosely draped them when he remembered they'd just end up discarded anyway. He left them hanging haphazardly off his shoulders as he latched onto Xuanmin.

Darkened by soaking in water, his midnight-black robes billowed across the surface like spilled ink. The expanding ripples urged them forward until they pooled against Xuanmin's snow-white fabric.

As the two of them tangled, Xue Xian nipped at Xuanmin’s jaw while mumbling, “Maybe this time, let me…”

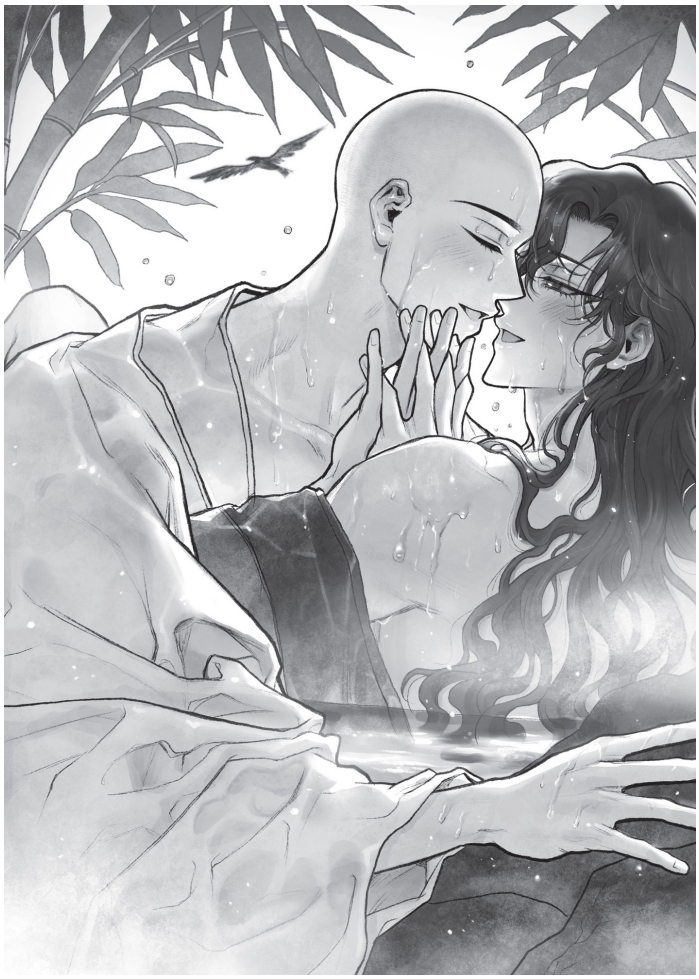
He trailed off, then shook his head and nuzzled into the crook of Xuanmin’s neck with his nose, murmuring to himself, “Never mind… Took so much effort to bring you back. Guess I should let you live.”

Xuanmin lifted an eyebrow but offered no comment.

Much later, when Xue Xian was pressed against the spring’s stone wall, his long legs extending from his drifting black robes to wrap around Xuanmin, the latter suddenly stilled just as the former was desperate, teetering close to release.

Xuanmin looked down at Xue Xian’s vacant gaze and parted lips, then asked in that steady, measured tone: “You really don’t want it? What you asked for?”

Playing deaf earlier, only to ask this question now—was he trying to torture him on purpose? Xue Xian hardly had the presence of mind to recall his own words. Eyes narrowed, he dragged Xuanmin down by the neck for an impatient kiss.



Xue Xian’s lips brushed Xuanmin’s as he panted between thrusts. “Don’t want it… Stop thinking so much… Just hurry up already.”

Having heard the dragon’s roar, the black bird had flapped itself over to greet them, but the second it burst from the woods, it saw the two tangled figures in the hot spring and bolted in sheer horror.

It found a crooked tree and spent hours sizing up the old hanging vines, trying to determine the optimal angle with which to hang itself, but couldn’t find one. In the end, it just stretched out its legs and passed out cold in the fork of the tree, dead to the world.

While the two on the mountain lost themselves in the passage of time, back in Wolong County’s Hugua Alley, Shitou Zhang slumped against his doorframe, still somewhat drunk. Snot and tears streamed down his face as he said goodbye to Lu Nianqi.

Such was the strange nature of mortal connections—two people who might have passed each other in the streets without a glance could suddenly find their fates intertwined. Even if their entire journey had been spent trading nothing but barbs, surviving perilous situations had forged a special bond between them. After a few more years of life, they’d naturally become old friends who cherished each other.

Shitou Zhang himself didn’t exactly know why he was crying. The times they’d spent together had been fraught with chaos and constant brushes with death. Maybe precisely because it had been so perilous—a once-in-a-lifetime experience—the memories brought a nostalgic rush of emotion. The old comrades who’d shared those days grew fewer with each passing year; one day, they would all be gone.

Lu Nianqi had never spoken a kind word to Shitou Zhang, but now, before leaving, he patted his shoulder and said something uncharacteristically comforting: “Why cry? You still have many years left in this life, and when this life ends, there’s always the next. Your old friends remain—at least those two always will. In some future lifetime, you may cross paths with them again.”

His tears spent, Shitou Zhang sobered up completely. He wiped at his eyes awkwardly, still chattering away as he said goodbye to Lu Nianqi.

Morning in Wolong County was never quiet. The riverbank buzzed with activity—fishing boats and passenger vessels came and went without pause, mingling with street vendors' cries to create the vibrant cacophony of daily life.

Lu Nianqi's partial blindness didn't mean he stumbled about, but it did make him different from ordinary people. He always moved at a measured pace, never briskly. It wasn't the hesitant gait typical of the visually impaired, but rather the air of someone who carefully considered their every step.

He walked slowly out of Hugua Alley. Like most people, he would usually turn right at the alley's end onto the bustling main street that led to the opposite district.

That main street housed the famous Tianxiangju Restaurant, whose morning steamed buns were legendary. Hearing the server's calls, Lu Nianqi turned right onto the main street and made his way to Tianxiangju, where he bought some steamed buns and pastries for the three children he'd taken in.

He should have continued straight; that was the most direct route home. But when the server handed him the wrapped packages, he was struck by an inexplicable urge to take a different path.

This impulse came without warning or reason. Normally, he'd call such things intuition. Being spiritually attuned, Lu Nianqi trusted such feelings. He pivoted on his heel and headed down a narrow alley behind Tianxiangju, taking a riverside path.

This path was desolate. Wealthier households would discard unwanted straw mats or moldy bedding here, dumping them on a barren slope by the riverbank. Over time, beggars and drifters had taken to scavenging the area for anything usable. Gradually, it became something of a beggars' den—though in recent years, the number of beggars had dwindled, and drifters had all but disappeared. On an early morning like this, the few remaining beggars wouldn't linger, as the riverside wind was too biting. They would slip into the market instead to beg for scraps or charity gruel.

Lu Nianqi didn't particularly care who had sheltered here or what had been discarded. He was simply following his intuition down this path.

When he reached a low slope, he stopped in his tracks. Faint, trembling breaths reached his ears from beyond the slope. “Who’s there?” Lu Nianqi asked, turning his head toward the sound.

Perhaps the way his eyes moved was different from most, or perhaps his gentle, scholarly appearance made him seem unthreatening—but after a long pause, a small, thin figure peeked out from behind the slope.

It was a child of three or four, face smudged with dirt, wearing a tattered tunic stained with grime. He seemed abandoned.

“Where are your parents?” Lu Nianqi asked.

The child stared at his eyes for a long moment, then at the bloodred mole on his forehead, before answering softly, “I don’t have any.”

“How did you end up here?” Lu Nianqi pressed.

The child thought for a moment only to shake his head.

Lu Nianqi patiently questioned the child for a while but to no avail. It was as if this child had sprouted from the earth itself.

Over the years, Lu Nianqi had taken in many children, and seeing one so young, he couldn’t possibly leave the boy behind. He led the child to the river’s shallows and helped him wash the dirt from his face.

Lu Nianqi was about to speak when the freshly washed child looked up timidly.

The child’s skin was actually very fair; his complexion had been hidden beneath the grime. For a fleeting moment, he bore a resemblance to another child from many years ago. But what truly stole Lu Nianqi’s breath was the red mole on the child’s forehead.

Small, damp from the river, placed right at the center of his brow—identical to the one on Lu Nianqi’s own.

Lu Nianqi knelt dumbly before the child, staring at his forehead. He even forgot to blink.

“Why are you…crying?” The child’s speech was thick with innocence, shy, with a slight lisp. Just hearing it made Lu Nianqi’s heart ache.

Lu Nianqi finally blinked, and a single tear spattered on the ground. He drew a breath. “No, I just… I was too happy for a second.”

The child watched him with wide, dark eyes, then clumsily reached up to wipe his tears, nearly poking him in the eye in the process. Lu Nianqi didn’t mind. He blinked rapidly, forcing back the rising moisture in his eyes, and asked with a rare gentleness: “How about I take you home?”

“Will I go hungry?” the child asked.

“Never. Not in this lifetime.”

The child gave Lu Nianqi a very serious once-over, as if weighing the truth of his words. However, he was far too young for complex judgments. All he saw was the bundle in Lu Nianqi’s hand. The warm steamed buns inside smelled good.

So the child nodded like a chick pecking rice. “Okay.”

I long for my loved one, living far away in the distance.[4]

After twelve years separated by the underworld, that loved one who dwelt far away had returned home.

Chapter 41:
Peaceful Years

DECADES IN THE MORTAL WORLD could pass with agonizing slowness. When standing alone in a mountain temple, every snap of the fingers could feel like a lifetime, endless and unyielding. Yet years could also vanish in the blink of an eye, rendering the vast East Sea to dust as swiftly as shifting clouds.

Time in Daze Temple flowed this way, sometimes sluggish, sometimes fleeting, until even Tongdeng could no longer remember how many years he had spent lighting lamps there. The only way to mark time's passage was through the occasional disasters and pains that struck his body.

That person fell ill, then quickly recovered.

That person narrowly escaped calamity.

That person's lifetime came to an end.

Lifespans were never fixed. Some were long, some were short. Tongdeng bore that person's misfortunes and suffering, not their years. While they didn't always live long, even in death, they knew no agony and slipped away peacefully each time.

An emperor in one life, a mayfly in another, then a beggar, a novice monk…

Prosperity and decline came in turns. After they spent a lifetime as an emperor, their subsequent lives were never lengthy. In just over a century, they'd cycled through several rebirths. Their last life as a novice monk had ended after a mere thirty-some years. Though Tongdeng shouldered all the pain of their final illness, it was still a regrettably short existence.

The trouble and ailments they'd suffered seemed far fewer in this current life. For sixteen full years, Tongdeng had only taken on one major illness for them—the rest were trivial, hardly worth mentioning. Fewer misfortunes were a blessing, but on the other hand, the connection between them had also grown faint.

During these sixteen years in Daze Temple, Tongdeng had been about to slip into deep meditation from boredom. If not for Xuanmin and Xue Xian's occasional visits, he might have ascended to immortality several times over.

Nevertheless, Mount Jiangsong was livelier than before. After the battle at Heishi Shore thirty years prior, the chief diviner of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices had learned of Daze Temple's significance to the state preceptor. Within a few years, a solitary hut appeared halfway up the mountain. Its door plaque was stamped with the imperial seal, marking it as a place of rest for the mountain's keeper.

The keeper was an experienced woodsman. He drew a meager stipend in exchange for quietly safeguarding the mountain's peace. His duties were straightforward: regularly patrolling the mountain and watching over ordinary folks to ensure they didn't wander where they shouldn't. After all, Tongdeng was in Daze Temple, absorbing the misfortunes of another from time to time. Any reckless visitor risked being caught in the crossfire. If sudden thunderstorms or wildfires erupted on the slopes, he was to report them promptly to the authorities to prevent another mountain-wide blaze.

An extra presence had been added to the mountain, but the keeper's patrol route only circled the halfway point. He never ventured up the old stone steps to the abandoned Daze Temple. Thus, keeper and monk existed like streams that never crossed. In over thirty years, Tongdeng had never once laid eyes on him; he only knew of his existence.

One early spring morning, while mist still clung to the mountain slopes, a youth with a gray cloth bundle strapped to his back made his way uphill. The lingering chill of late winter hadn't fully dissipated, and the mountainside remained damp and gloomy—yet the boy had rolled his sleeves up to his forearms, revealing lean, sinewy muscle.

His sun-browned skin spoke of a childhood spent laboring outdoors. His hair was tied back neatly, and his every movement brimmed with vigor, radiating the particular boldness unique to young men. He was the son of the previous mountain keeper, and he'd come now to take over the role.

After pausing by the keeper's hut at mid-slope, he untied his bundle and stepped inside. He placed the bundle on the inner chamber's bed, gave

the sparse furnishings a glance, and set about tidying with practiced ease. When that was done, he picked up a wooden bucket, shut the door behind him, and headed deeper into the mountains.

He'd wanted to fetch water from the mountain stream, but his steps halted when he passed a stone stairway. He knew these steps. Following them upward would lead to the mountaintop and the legendary ghost temple.

Strangely, whenever people mentioned the temple, emotion stirred in his chest. He couldn't shake the feeling that long, long ago, he'd gazed across the mountain ridges at that very temple and glimpsed lamplight flickering within.

However, that was impossible. His home stood at the county's outskirts, not the mountain's heights. There was no vantage point to offer such a view. Besides, his thoughts of the ghost temple always brought something else with them—an inexplicable pang of melancholy.

As he stood before the stone steps, that strange sensation inside him surged.

After a brief moment of hesitation, the youth resolutely set foot on the stairs.

Legends claimed the ghost temple had stood abandoned for centuries and had been devoid of life since, steeped in silence and solitude. As he ascended, his surroundings grew increasingly hushed. Where others might have grown fearful, he advanced without the slightest trepidation, taking three steps at a time until he reached the summit.

Daze Temple stood in better condition than he'd imagined, yet it was also more desolate. In better condition, because the front hall and pagoda showed almost no traces of past fire; even the temple gates stood tall and sturdy despite being weathered with age. More desolate, because the last touches of winter had produced a recent layer of snow. Where all evidence of snowfall had vanished from the nearby county, trampled away, here, the temple remained a boundless white, amplifying the sense of profound loneliness.

The temple gate stood slightly ajar. Peering through the gap revealed little. Acting on some impulse he couldn't name, as if guided by spirits, the

youth reached out and pushed the gate open.

An ancient, grating creak sounded as the gates swung open, laying bare the temple's insides.

The youth froze instantly, his face slack with astonishment as he stared at one particular spot.

There, standing silently on the long, empty steps of the ancient temple's main hall, was a tall and lean man, clad in spotless white robes. Against the empty stretch of snow, a sense of solitude radiated from him. It was one that had lasted over a hundred years.

"You are…" By the time the youth had regained his senses, he realized he'd stepped into the temple grounds and moved to the base of the steps. He looked up at the figure in white, his forehead creased in confusion. "Who are you? Why are you in this ghost temple?"

The white-robed monk seemed stunned. He studied the youth's face, his expression flashing between epiphany and confusion. "You…can see me?"

The youth hesitated, then nodded.

It was the year of Guimao. It had been seventeen years since that novice monk's death, thirty-seven years since the battle on Heishi Shore, and over a century since Tongdeng had passed away.

Even the longest vigil must end; kindred spirits always reunite.

In the distance, streaks of white lightning flashed across the sky, followed by the low rumble of thunder sweeping along the horizon. The first spring storm of the year had arrived. The season of blooming mountain flowers wouldn't be far behind.

Hundreds of miles away, in Ningyang County of Huizhou Prefecture, its most famous eatery was as packed as ever. Xue Xian and Xuanmin were at the entrance. They scanned the crowd before stepping inside.

Half an hour earlier, Xue Xian had been across the river, summoning rain. When he was done, a sudden craving struck him. He wanted some peach-braised pork belly. As always, Xuanmin raised no objections, so the two rode the clouds hundreds of miles to the renowned Jiuwei House.

“You know, when I was staying in Ningyang County, I ate their specialties almost daily,” Xue Xian remarked as they entered. “Though I couldn’t move freely back then, so that bookworm Jiang Shining had to buy them for me. I wonder if the flavors have changed after thirty-odd years.”

Xuanmin glanced at the breakfast stall set up outside. “Mm. I remember this place.”

Xue Xian blinked in surprise. “What? You’ve been here too?”

“When I went to apprehend you at the Jiang family clinic, it was at the request of a waiter from this very establishment,” Xuanmin explained.

Xue Xian had lived for centuries; his mind would have overflowed long ago if he were to remember every minute detail of his life. He only retained memories of particularly special people or events—like how Xuanmin had scooped him up from the floor of the Jiang family clinic’s side room, or how they’d encountered the county officers upon leaving. He couldn’t recall anyone else present at the time. However, prompted by Xuanmin’s words, a vague impression of the waiter surfaced in Xue Xian’s mind.

“Now that you mention it, there might have been someone like that. Can’t quite remember.”

The waiter at Jiuwei House was exceptionally hospitable. Despite the crowd, he did not turn the two away upon seeing them enter; instead he beamed and informed them that all dishes could be packed for takeout. If they didn’t mind, there were also two tables with fewer patrons where they could share.

The bamboo house where Xue Xian and Xuanmin resided was separated from this location by a great river, no less than a hundred miles away. Carrying food containers while somersaulting through the clouds would have been most undignified.

After exchanging a glance with the fastidious Xuanmin for approval, Xue Xian waved grandly at the waiter. “No matter, we’ll share.”

“Excellent! Our apologies for the inconvenience. The proprietors have declared shared tables receive half off,” the waiter said cheerfully as he led them to a table.

This table indeed had few occupants. There was just one person, fair-skinned and scholarly in appearance, though his clothing suggested at least modest means.

Perhaps because Xue Xian had encountered few scholars worth remembering and even fewer he was close to, every scholar in the world seemed to carry traces of Jiang Shining.

“This fellow bears some resemblance to that bookworm,” Xue Xian said.

Here he went again. Xuanmin wordlessly pinched Xue Xian’s chin, signaling him to sit down instead of gawking.

The scholar’s first dish had just arrived. Noticing their arrival, he offered them a friendly smile and gestured to his claypot-braised chicken. “It’s fate to share a table. Please, feel free to have some.”

His smile made his resemblance to Jiang Shining even more pronounced, so Xue Xian readily struck up a conversation. If nothing else, the two found common ground in their culinary tastes. When the waiter finished serving all their dishes, both men laughed in surprise. They had ordered identical meals.

“What a remarkable coincidence. To be frank, when I first saw the two of you, you seemed strangely familiar,” the scholar said with a gentle smile. “Almost like old acquaintances.”

Xue Xian started a little and exchanged a glance with Xuanmin, then turned back to the scholar with a smirk. “How curious. We were just thinking you resemble an old friend of ours. Perhaps we were companions in a past life.”

The meal left Xue Xian in a good mood. Upon leaving, he offered the scholar three paper talismans, promising to answer his call for help right away if he ever needed assistance.

Even after they returned to their bamboo home, a faint smile lingered on Xue Xian’s lips.

“Did you look at his features? He’s been blessed with fortune and longevity in this life.”

Xue Xian chattered on, and Xuanmin listened for a while before simply nodding with a soft grunt. Then, he grasped Xue Xian's chin and sealed his mouth with a kiss.

The sight was enough to send the black bird scrambling to get away. It fled as far as possible, terrified the scene would sear its eyes out.

The two of them remained locked together until they finally calmed down around midnight. Wrapped in each other's arms, they drifted into a light slumber.

Dreams came easily in shallow sleep.

Xuanmin found himself back in the stone chamber beneath the bamboo building, with a glaring Xue Xian standing unnervingly close.

"Just how much do you owe me? All I'm asking for is a drop of blood from your heart. Will you give it to me or not?" His voice and expression were icy, tinged with malice.

Xuanmin closed his eyes but didn't move away. He let Xue Xian bury his face against his neck, pierce his skin with his teeth, and draw blood.

When Xue Xian straightened up, his hateful smirk was smeared with blood that stood out starkly against his pale complexion.

Xuanmin raised a hand to wipe it away, but he'd only gotten halfway when someone nudged him.

"Were you dreaming?" the man murmured.

Xuanmin's eyes snapped open to see the subject of his dream propped up on an elbow, watching him. Gone was the malice and hatred; instead, there was a gentle curve at the corners of his lips.

Xuanmin stared blankly at Xue Xian before realizing that he'd dreamed of his inner demon again. The specter had haunted him since the battle at Heishi Shore, surfacing whenever his guard was down—during meditation, while resting, even during brief naps. It was, perhaps, a testament to his profound and lingering fear.

But as the thirty years passed, the inner demon appeared less and less. In the past few years, it'd only emerged a handful of times; in another year or two, it might vanish entirely. Despite how long it'd taken him and how

slow he'd been to recover, he finally felt ready to move past those persistent feelings of guilt and yearning.

Because the one beside him had never left him. He was a fortunate man.

Xuanmin's dark gaze rested on Xue Xian for a quiet moment before he suddenly rolled over and pinned him down. The kiss that followed was forceful but heavy with tenderness.

"Do you want to be stuck inside for days…?" Xue Xian grumbled, though he was already reciprocating.

And so they spent another long time entangled with each other.

In the aftermath of their passionate interlude, Xue Xian leaned languidly against Xuanmin's shoulder, idly stroking his chin with a finger.

"The more I think about it, the more I believe your whole prim and proper image is an act. All I did was bring up a few other people and you started tormenting me, denying me for ages…"

His voice was rough with spent desire, but his expression showed only contentment. It was clear he was teasing.

If someone needed thirty years to figure this out, they really were a genius.

The black bird, which had been hiding outside for quite some time, heard no further movements and cautiously peeked in—just in time to catch Xue Xian's remark. Feeling like it'd been struck deaf and blind from the assault, it spat loudly in their general direction.

Xue Xian's languidness evaporated in an instant. "You've got guts!" he said, pointing with rejuvenated vigor. "You dare spit at me? Try that again and I guarantee we'll be eating roasted bird tonight."

The bird spat once more. Screeching as if its life was on the line, it fluttered away.

Xue Xian stared at the empty window, speechless.

Xuanmin leaned against the wall, watching quietly while *somebody* earnestly picked a fight with a bird.

When Xue Xian turned around, he caught the faint quirk of Xuanmin's lips just as it faded away. He gawked. "Were you just trying to stifle a laugh?"

"I was not." Xuanmin's expression was utterly composed.

Xue Xian glared. "I saw it!"

"You saw wrong." Xuanmin sounded unshakable.

"…Laugh for me again?"

Xuanmin straightened Xue Xian's robes for him without so much as a word, then rose with flawless serenity.

After tidying up, Xuanmin turned back. "Shall we visit Daze Temple?"

"Visit my ass! You laugh first!" Xue Xian was already climbing out of bed to attack him.

Just as their tussle began, the black bird returned. This time, there was a messenger pigeon in tow, its leg bearing the customary missive from the Court of Imperial Sacrifices.

Xuanmin unfolded the thin paper and read it carefully.

"More trouble?" Xue Xian asked as he peered over Xuanmin's shoulder.

In recent years, Xuanmin had distanced himself from the role of state preceptor in court affairs. Relying too heavily on one individual was unwise, and saving the world didn't require an official title. The letters from the court had become far less frequent. In this one, the chief diviner had sent the annual prognostications of fortune and misfortune. A routine procedure.

Xuanmin closed the letter. "Nothing urgent," he said. "Another bountiful year ahead."

Within this bustling mortal world, we ask for only this: that debts be repaid, kindness be returned, promises be honored, and love be cherished.

May the seasons and weather be kind, and may the land enjoy lasting peace.

Then, this would be a life without regrets.

Epilogue:
Loquat Rain

THE YEAR'S EARLY SUMMER arrived unusually hot, with far more rain than usual. It poured down relentlessly, sometimes three times a day.

The stone-paved roads in the county town dried quickly despite the humidity, but those in the mountains were another matter. Every step sank into wet mud, and some hollows had turned into a viscous soup that splattered filth with every misstep. Only someone with a few screws loose would trek up the mountain in this weather.

For example, the group who were currently on Mount Jiangsong.

"One final time," Tongdeng said, standing with his hands behind his back at the entrance of Daze Temple's main hall. He watched Xuanmin slap cleansing talismans onto Xue Xian. "Don't come here tomorrow. At least give me one day of peace."

"I'm not here for you," Xue Xian retorted as he turned to inspect the back of his thin robes and lifted a leg for Xuanmin to toss another talisman on. "I'm guarding my loquats. They should ripen soon, but I don't trust you not to steal them."

Tongdeng had lived his life with utmost restraint and dignity. Never once in all his years of wandering had he succumbed to something as base as gluttony. To be so slandered by this troublemaker nearly made him laugh in disbelief.

He turned to Xuanmin. "You're just going to let him say that?"

Long accustomed to such scenes, Xuanmin remained silent. If he could control Xue Xian, would things have been how they were? He maintained his usual composure and continued to diligently remove mud stains from Xue Xian.

Xue Xian had charged up the mountain without a care for what the roads looked like. By the time he'd barged into Daze Temple's courtyard, his mud-splattered robe had resembled a peacock's fanning tail. Xuanmin

had grabbed his sleeve to give him a thorough cleaning at the temple's entrance.

"Hey, that's enough," Xue Xian said, lifting his arms and turning in a circle. "These robes are thin. If you keep tugging them, they'll tear. Since when did you two become such fussy old men?"

"Stop moving," Xuanmin said flatly.

Tongdeng turned and headed inside with a flip of his sleeves.

Once Xue Xian had been purified down to the last speck of dust, he clicked his tongue. Not wanting to waste Xuanmin's efforts, he deigned to lift the hem of his robes as he stepped over the threshold, carefully gauging the height to avoid picking up more dirt. Xuanmin, a step behind him, watched as Xue Xian hovered in the doorway. He had yet to set his foot down. With a light swat, Xuanmin urged him to quit dawdling and go inside.

Xue Xian shot him a sidelong glance. "Where do you think you're hitting?"

"Are you two planning to perform an opera out there?"

Tongdeng had settled cross-legged by a cushion. The low table before him was covered in soft white paper, upon which two lines of characters were freshly written. Xue Xian sauntered over to stand by the desk. He cocked his head at the paper.

"Writing out lessons for that swarthy kid again, huh?"

Tongdeng clicked his tongue and lifted his brush. "You call my apprentice 'bald donkey,' call me 'monk,' and now you call Yunzhou 'swarthy kid.' Can you address anyone properly at all?"

"No."

Tongdeng didn't have an answer for that.

The "swarthy kid" Xue Xian had labeled was none other than the current mountain keeper of Mount Jiangsong. When he'd first come up the mountain, he'd been a teenager of fourteen or fifteen and lacked a proper name. Now that he'd reached adulthood, Tongdeng had given him the name "Yunzhou."

Since becoming familiar with Tongdeng, he would stay at Daze Temple after his daily patrols. Sometimes he'd learn to read from the monk; sometimes he'd brew a small pot of tea to chat over. Tongdeng couldn't drink tea, but he loved its aroma. With this back-and-forth, he'd grown acquainted with Xue Xian and Xuanmin as well.

Xue Xian rummaged in his sleeve for a moment before producing a high-quality inkstick, which he placed on the table. "I noticed your ink was running low, so I brought you another."

Tongdeng picked up the inkstick and examined it before nodding. "Good quality. Now, go guard your loquats."

Xue Xian dragged Xuanmin past the altar to the rear door of the main hall.

The courtyard outside had once been shaded by many trees, offering respite from the summer heat. Unfortunately, in the great fire years ago, they'd been reduced to charred stumps that jutted bleakly from the mud.

Earlier that year—whether due to drunken whimsy or mistaken medicine—Xue Xian had developed a sudden craving for loquats. The bamboo loft where they lived was too shrouded in mist to successfully cultivate any, so after two failed attempts, he'd persuaded Xuanmin to plant some at Daze Temple, a place that had basically become their summer retreat. Xuanmin, ever indulgent, had promptly acquired a loquat sapling and planted it in the courtyard.

Tongdeng had glanced at it; "Not bad" was all he'd offered, then he said no more. The sapling was so small it would take ages to bear fruit. If those two wanted to fuss over it, so be it.

Surprisingly, their endeavor struck a chord with Yunzhou. Within days, he had quietly brought back three wild loquat trees, already lush and full-grown, from the mountain valleys and transplanted them into the rear courtyard.

Wild loquats were hardy by nature. Even with minimal care, they flourished, turning heavy with fruit that shifted from green to gold as the season progressed.

From the moment the loquats appeared, Xue Xian had dragged Xuanmin over to stand guard daily, waiting for them to ripen.

In all his years, Tongdeng had never seen such a glutton—let alone one who happened to be a dragon no one could afford to offend and whom his apprentice had somehow managed to snag. Truly, this was karmic retribution.

Tongdeng picked up his brush again, ready to finish transcribing the text, when the temple gate creaked open once more. He sighed. There would be no completing this today.

He didn't need to look up to know who had entered, but he looked up anyway. Yunzhou latched the gate from inside before turning toward the main hall. Over the years, he'd shot up like bamboo, growing tall and straight. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing arms corded with lean muscle.

He wasn't *that* tan—lightly at most. That wise one's moniker for Yunzhou had shifted him several hues down.

"The sky's darkened. It'll rain again soon," Yunzhou remarked as he entered, as naturally as if he were stepping into his own home.

Tongdeng grunted in acknowledgment and attempted once more to lift his brush, but this time it was his own hand that paused. He turned to Yunzhou. "What did you bring this time?"

"Tea," Yunzhou said, raising the objects in his hand to show him—then smiled. "And wine."

The offhand gesture was so reminiscent of someone from many, many years ago that Tongdeng momentarily froze.

"Planning to trick me into drinking again?" he replied on instinct.

Yunzhou bent to place the tea on the desk, answering absently, "Trick you how? It's not Autumn Dew White anyway."

The moment the words left his mouth, he stopped, then looked up to find Tongdeng equally stunned.

Tongdeng opened his mouth. "You…"

"I…don't know why I said that." Yunzhou seemed at a complete loss.

"Oh," said Tongdeng. He smiled. "Never mind. Leave the tea. Take the wine away. Don't distract me from transcribing this for you."

Yunzhou nodded. Leaning against the desk, he watched Tongdeng write a few characters before he hesitantly touched his own face. “Has my handwriting improved?”

“It has.” Tongdeng glanced at him, then continued to write. “At least you’ve gone from crawling on your stomach to crawling on your knees.” He didn’t look up, but the corner of his mouth curved.

Yunzhou sighed and straightened up, the wine jar in hand as he walked to the back door to take a look.

Xue Xian was leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed, chatting quietly with Xuanmin while he kept an eye on the loquats. When he saw Yunzhou, he tilted his chin up. “We were just talking about you. What’s that? Wine?”

Yunzhou raised the jar in their direction. “I checked the loquats this morning. They’re ripe. You can pick them to go with this.”

Xue Xian blinked. “First time I’ve heard of pairing loquats with wine.”

Yunzhou disappeared behind the altar again, setting the wine aside to study calligraphy with Tongdeng.

Xue Xian’s nose was sharp—even though the wine was gone, the aroma still lingered, and he sniffed the air twice before Xuanmin caught his chin and turned his head back.

“You may have the loquats,” Xuanmin said. “*Not* the wine.”

Xue Xian narrowed his eyes for a second, then slouched against the door in exaggerated fashion.

“Monk, your disciple is rebelling,” he shouted inside. “He won’t let me drink!”

Tongdeng, mid-lesson with Yunzhou, didn’t look up. “What do I care?”

Xue Xian hadn’t actually expected anything useful from him; he was just raising a ruckus. Turning back, he patted Xuanmin’s face. “Why am I not allowed wine?”

Xuanmin caught his wrist and pushed away the offending limb.

“The last time, you drank a jar of Luofu Spring and dragged me to the snow peaks of Taihang,” Xuanmin explained calmly. “The time before that, a jar and a half of Bamboo Viridian landed us in the Eastern Sea. And before that—”

“Enough with all the befores!” Xue Xian yanked Xuanmin closer and cut him off with a kiss. Then, he mischievously licked his lips before retreating to lean primly against the door again.

Like usual, Xuanmin couldn’t say anything to that.

Turning Xuanmin’s face away with his hand, Xue Xian pointed toward the courtyard. “Don’t look at me, look over there. It’s raining.”

Xuanmin sighed. Outside, rain had indeed begun to fall.

The early summer rain came without thunder, fine and dense. With the gentle rustling of its patters, the world around them seemed to slow, turning peaceful and tranquil.

In the nearby county town, vendors hurried to move their wares indoors while passersby raised their sleeves to shield their heads, and wives in each household gathered laundry from bamboo racks. From distant villages came the calls of chickens and dogs, all muted by the rain and accompanied by the rhythmic clip-clop of hooves on official roads.

Behind the altar, the quiet murmur of Tongdeng and Yunzhou’s conversation occasionally reached Xue Xian and Xuanmin. Though too faint to understand, it was undoubtedly about everyday human affairs.

Xuanmin glanced at the fruits in the courtyard. After a few weeks of Xue Xian’s vigil, the raindrops were now polishing each loquat to a gleaming golden yellow. They were vivid as they hung heavy from the branches.

When Xuanmin returned his eyes to Xue Xian’s face, he found the dragon with a corner of his mouth quirked up.

Xuanmin watched Xue Xian for a moment before he dropped his head to press a kiss to those smiling lips.

Perhaps this was what the world’s finest days looked like.

Gentle rain on loquat leaves, and peace throughout the prosperous land.

Copper Coins

– FIN –

CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

XUE XIAN 薛闲 (“IDLE”): A dragon that was left partially paralyzed after being maimed.

XUANMIN 玄悯 (“PROFOUND COMPASSION”): A wandering monk with a mysterious past.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

XUE XIAN’S PARTY

JIANG SHINING 江世宁: A scholarly ghost who perished three years ago in a fire.

LU NIANQI 陆廿七: A young man who inherited divination abilities from his deceased older brother, Lu Shijiu.

SHITOU ZHANG 石头张: A talented, spiritually sensitive, but unrefined stonemason.

QINGPING COUNTY

AUNT CHEN 陈婶: One of the caretakers of the Fang family pharmacy.

UNCLE CHEN 陈叔: One of the caretakers of the Fang family pharmacy.

FANG CHENG 方承: Jiang Shijing’s husband and the Fang family pharmacy’s doctor.

JIANG SHIJING 江世静: Jiang Shining’s older sister. Calls him A-Ning.

XINGZI 杏子: A young woman who works at the Fang family pharmacy.

THE COURT OF IMPERIAL SACRIFICES

CHIEF DIVINER 太卜: A woman responsible for the Court of Imperial Sacrifices' divinations.

CHIEF RITUALIST 太祝: A man responsible for the Court of Imperial Sacrifices' rituals.

TONGDENG 同灯: The state preceptor.

ZUHONG 祖弘: The man who taught Xuanmin.

OTHER

SONGYUN 松云: The sorcerer that Xuanmin and Xue Xian seek.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Courtesy Addresses

GONGZI: A respectful address for young men, originally only for those from affluent households. Though appropriate in all formal occasions, it's often preferred when the addressee outranks the speaker.

SHIFU: A respectful address usually meant for one's master, but can also be used for Buddhist monks and nuns.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

GLOSSARY

COURT OF IMPERIAL SACRIFICES: A central governmental agency in imperial China that was devoted to carrying out sacrificial ceremonies and other rituals.

DIVINATION: Chinese fortune-telling covers a wide variety of techniques and methods. Generally, diviners use their understanding of qi, the five elements, yin and yang, and astronomy to calculate and make observations.

The art of geomancy or **feng shui** involves the diviner calculating and manipulating the qi flowing through the area through different layouts and orientations. The balanced and harmonious flow of energy within a location is believed to impart powerful benefits.

With physiognomy and **palmistry**, the diviner reads a person's fate and state of health through their facial features, complexion, body, palms, or bones.

EXORCISM: Both Daoist priests and Buddhist monks could be tasked to remove spirits from a location, but their methods would differ. In contrast to Western and Daoist exorcism techniques, which focus on forcefully expelling or even destroying the spirit, Buddhist monks sought to help the spirit move peacefully to the afterlife, known as "transcendence." Even now, Chinese funerals will hire the services of monks, who perform rites to guide the deceased onwards.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing or incapacitation.

Another central concept in traditional Chinese medicine is that disease arises from an imbalance of elements in the body caused by disharmony in internal functions. For example, an excess of internal heat can cause symptoms such as fever, thirst, insomnia, and redness of the face. Excess internal heat can be treated with the consumption of foods with cooling properties, such as lotus tea.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite and contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and difference. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish whichever energy they lack.

About the Author

Mu Su Li is a signed author on Jinjiang Literature City. A writer of the post-90s generation known for her wild imagination and whimsical style, she loves fantasy and believes words can hold warmth. She hopes that every story she writes brings comfort and joy to her readers. Her signature works include *A Certain Someone*, *Panguan: The Twelfth Gate*, *Global Examination*, *Three Hundred Years of Longing*, and more.

Footnotes

Chapter 29: Passerby

[1] Created by breeding multiple poisonous insects in a jar, where they consume each other to produce a powerful mutant specimen. Can be used as a base for dark arts.

Chapter 36: Rivers of Blood

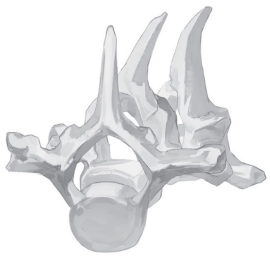
[2] Term of address for one’s senior brother.

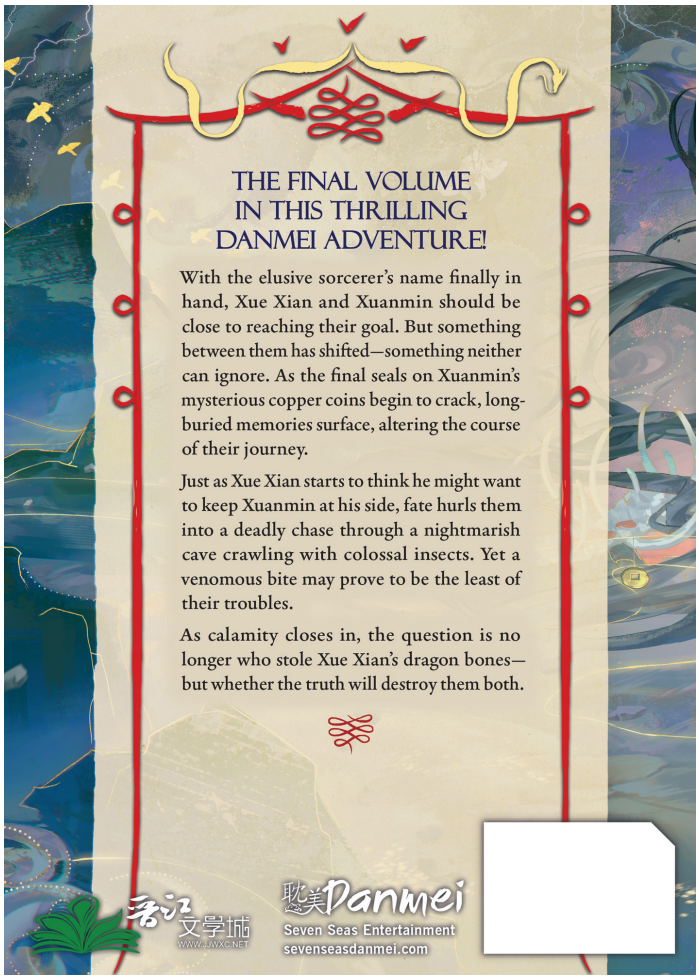
Chapter 38: Centuries of Peace

[3] Spiritual objects that purportedly inhabit the bodies of Buddhist masters. In ancient times, sarira would be collected from their owners’ ashes post-cremation and enshrined.

Chapter 40: Mortal Affairs

[4] From “Night Rain,” a Tang Dynasty poem by Bai Juyi.





THE FINAL VOLUME IN THIS THRILLING DANMEI ADVENTURE!

With the elusive sorcerer's name finally in hand, Xue Xian and Xuanmin should be close to reaching their goal. But something between them has shifted—something neither can ignore. As the final seals on Xuanmin's mysterious copper coins begin to crack, long-buried memories surface, altering the course of their journey.

Just as Xue Xian starts to think he might want to keep Xuanmin at his side, fate hurls them into a deadly chase through a nightmarish cave crawling with colossal insects. Yet a venomous bite may prove to be the least of their troubles.

As calamity closes in, the question is no longer who stole Xue Xian's dragon bones—but whether the truth will destroy them both.

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